XIV
Tearmoon Empire
Nozomu Mochitsuki
Illustrator: Gilse

Characters

Tearmoon Empire

Patricia

A young girl who appeared with Bel.

GRANDDAUGHTER AND GRANDMOTHER

Miabel

After an arrow pierced her throat, she disappeared into the light. Now, she has reappeared, looking a bit older.

Mia

Protagonist. The sole princess of the empire. Ex-selfish brat. Actually a coward. A revolution leads to her execution, but she somehow leaps back through time and wakes up a twelve-year-old again. She successfully avoids a repeat encounter with the guillotine, but then Bel shows up...

The Four Dukes' Families

Ruby

The daughter of the Duke of Redmoon. A gallant lady with a wardrobe to match.

Citrina

The only daughter of the House of Yellowmoon. Bel's first friend.

Esmeralda

The eldest daughter of the House of Greenmoon. Self-proclaimed best friend of Mia.

Sapphias

The eldest son of the House of Bluemoon. Got into the student council thanks to Mia.

Ludwig

Young, motivated government official. Sharp tongue. Ardently believes in Mia and is trying to make her Empress.

Anne

Mia's maid-in-waiting. Born into a poor family of merchants. Helped Mia in the previous timeline. In the present, she is an ardent Mia devotee.

ARCHENEMESIS

Dion

The strongest knight in the Empire. In the previous timeline, he was Mia's executioner.

※ Future Timeline Relationship

※ Previous Timeline Relationship

Revolution

Archnemesis

Outcount Rudolvon's Family

Cyril

Tiona's younger brother. Super smart. Developed cold-resistant wheat.

Tiona

The eldest daughter of Outcount Rudolvon. Looks up to Mia. In the previous timeline, she led the revolutionary army.

Assistance

Archnemesis

Kingdom of Sunkland

Keithwood

Prince Sion's attendant. A cynic—but a competent one.

Sion

Crown Prince. All-around genius. In the previous timeline, he was Mia's archnemesis, aided Tiona, and eventually became known as the "Penal King." In the present, he accepts that Mia is the Great Sage of the Empire.

[Wind Crows] Sunkland's intelligence service.

[White Crows] A team within the Wind Crows formed with a specific goal in mind.

Support

Holy Principality of Belluga

Support

Rafina

The duke's daughter. Saint-Noel Academy's de facto decision maker. In the previous timeline, she supported Sion and Tiona from behind the scenes. Her smile can be lethal.

[Saint-Noel Academy]

A super elite school attended by all the highborn children of neighboring nations.

Kingdom of Remno

Abel

Second Prince. In the previous timeline, he was known to be an extraordinary playboy. Now, as a result of meeting Mia, he works diligently to improve his swordsmanship instead.

[Forkroad & Co.]

Chloe

The only heir of Marco Forkroad, whose company spans multiple kingdoms. She is Mia's classmate and book buddy.

Chaos Serpents

A group of chaosmongers trying to wreak havoc upon the world. They are deeply hostile toward the Holy Principality of Belluga and the Central Orthodox Church. Traces of their clandestine misdeeds can be found throughout history, but the details are shrouded in mystery.

Tearmoon Empire

Nina
Esmeralda's maid-in-waiting.

Balthazar
A fellow disciple of Ludwig's cohort.

Gilbert
A fellow disciple of Ludwig's cohort.

Musta
Head chef of the imperial court of the Tearmoon Empire.

Elise
Anne's younger sister and the second daughter of the Littstein family. Mia's court author.

Liora
Tiona's maid. Hails from the Lulu tribe who live in the forest. An expert archer.

Vanos
Dion's adjutant and former vice-captain of a hundred-man squad in Tearmoon's imperial army. A giant of a man.

Matthias
Mia's father. Tearmoon's emperor. Dotes on his daughter.

Adelaide
Mia's mother. Deceased.

Galv
An old wiseman and master to Ludwig.

Hildebrandt
Ruby's fiancé-to-be, Mia's cousin, and an unparalleled horse maniac.

Equestrian Kingdom

Aima
Descendant of the Fire Clan. Mia's friend.

Malong
Mia's senior. Club leader of Saint-Noel Academy's Horsemanship Club.

Kuolan
A Moonhare. Mia's favorite horse.

Kingdom of Sunkland

Monica
A member of the White Crows. Infiltrated the Kingdom of Remno as an attendant to Abel.

Graham
A member of the White Crows. He is Monica's superior.

Merchants

Marco
Chloe's father. Head of Forkroad & Co.

Shalloak
A powerful merchant who sells all sorts of goods to kingdoms throughout the continent.

Kingdom of Remno

Lynsha
The daughter of a fallen noble familyin Remno. She attends Saint-Noel Academy while working as Rafina's maid

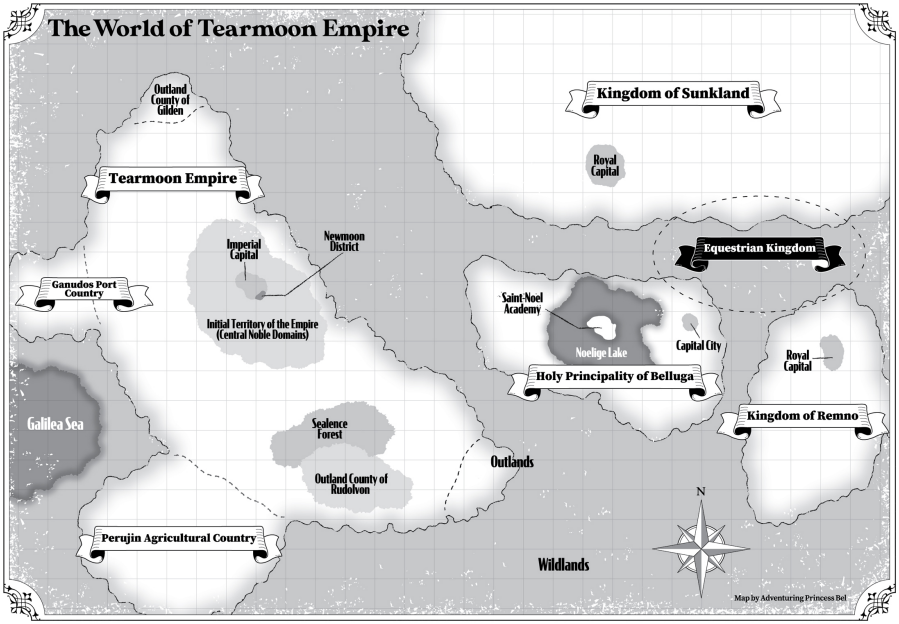
Perujin Agricultural Country

Rania
The third princess of Perujin. Mia's schoolmate.

Arshia
The second princess of Perujin. Rania's older sister.

Story

Mia, selfish princess of the Tearmoon Empire, sets off with Ludwig's diary to solve the mystery of how her granddaughter Bel and her grandmother Patty have time traveled, one from the past and one from the future. She begins by doing all she can to free Patty from the Serpents' teachings, but when she returns to Tearmoon for summer break, Ruby suddenly comes to her with talks of an impending betrothal...


The World of Tearmoon Empire
Outland County of Gilden
Kingdom of Sunkland
Royal Capital
Tearmoon Empire
Imperial Capital
Newmoon District
Equestrian Kingdom
Ganudos Port Country
Saint-Noel Academy
Noelige Lake
Capital City
Royal Capital
Initial Territory of the Empire (Central Noble Domains)
Holy Principality of Belluga
Galilea Sea
Kingdom of Remno
Sealence Forest
Outlands
Outland County of Rudolvon
N
Perujin Agricultural Country
Wildlands
Map by Adventuring Princess Bel

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Chapter 1: The Horsemanship Tournament Begins!

It was early in the morning on the day of the horsemanship tournament.

"U-Ugh..."

There were still a few hours before the sun would show its face to the world, and Mia woke up to a "Screeeeee!" in her dimly lit room.

Was that scream just me dreaming...? she wondered, still half asleep. But immediately, she once again heard the same "Screeeeee!" and Mia let out the same call inside her head.

Wh-What in the moons was that?!

She pretended to turn over in bed and surveyed her surroundings. Her spacious room was empty. Had she been at Saint-Noel Academy, Anne would have been asleep in the bed beside hers, but unfortunately, it was currently summer break. She was the only one in her room here at the Whitemoon Palace, which meant she was completely and utterly alone! But in that case...what was the noise she had just heard?

Just as that thought passed through her head, another "Screeeeee!" reverberated through the air. At the same time, the wooden grate over her window began to clatter and shake, causing Mia to tremble. She glanced into the darkness before turning her back to the window. Then, she slowly brought the blanket over her head.

If only Anne were here... I would be so worried for her considering how afraid she'd be that I'd have to go rescue her. Yet I'm all alone now. Yup, I should be able to just go to sleep. I'm not afraid at all! There is absolutely no need to get out of bed to figure out the source of that noise at all!

Mia closed her eyes shut as she muttered to herself. However, there was no stopping that noise.

Ugh... I can't sleep at all! She groaned under her covers. But in a

short while, it suddenly became morning.

"My, h-how odd! How is it morning already?! Just what could explain this strange phenomenon...?" She asked aloud while unconsciously wiping the drool from her lips. It seems that the answer to her question was that she had simply fallen asleep.

"Good morning, milady. Are you awake?" The door opened, revealing Anne. Upon seeing her, Mia let out a sigh of relief.

"Ah, Anne... Greetings. It's quite a beautiful morning."

"Yes, but the wind last night was quite strong. Were you able to sleep?"

"Wind? Oh, so that was just wind... Yes, I suppose I was able to sleep." As Mia got out of bed, Anne opened the covering over the window, letting in a beam of dazzling morning light.

"What beautiful weather. It's the perfect day for a horse ride!" Mia looked up to the sky. It was a clear blue, and the clouds that lazily floated through reflected the summer light of the sun and glowed. The wind brought with it the serene scent of morning, which Mia breathed in with a big stretch.

"In that case, let us be off!" she exclaimed. Their destination was of course the dining hall.

After her usual routine of chowing down on the chef's cooking, Mia quickly changed into her riding gear before heading to the stables of the Whitemoon Palace with an extra pep in her step. Following events in the Equestrian Kingdom, Dongfeng had become her personal horse and had been transferred from the stables of the Princess Guard to those at the palace. Seeing her face, he let out a calm whinny.

"Oho! I look forward to working with you today too, Dongfeng." Mia petted his nose. Had this been Kuolan, Mia would have soon been sprayed with a sneeze. However, Dongfeng was both a knight and a gentleman. He would never be so rude...but at the same time, Mia couldn't help but feel a longing for old times.

Oho ho! How odd it is that I now look back on being sneezed on with fondness... I'll have to be sure to give him plenty of rides once I return to Saint-Noel's.

Just then, Mia heard a voice. "Ah, Princess Mia. Have you come to care for the horses?" There was energy in that voice, and Mia turned to find Aima approaching her with a smile. But then, her expression quickly darkened as she began to look around. "Does

Dion Alaia happen to be in attendance...?" Aima's voice trembled in fear.

"You have no need to worry, Aima. There's no need to bring Dion around the palace. More importantly, thank you for today." Mia gave her a curtsy.

Aima crossed her arms with a proud look in her eyes. "Ha! It is Keilai you should thank, not I." Aima glanced at the stables. Keilai turned to them as if he had heard their words. His nostrils began to twitch...but all he let out was a loud snort.

"Keilai appears to be in good spirits as well! Ha! With this weather, we shall be able to have a good battle." Aima glanced up at the sky. "This time, we shall not lose to the Tearmoon Empire."

"Oho ho! I wonder." Mia egged her on with a smile. "Hildebrandt and Skyred Hare are skilled opponents. You'd do best to keep your guard up."

Thus, Mia's horsemanship tournament began.

Chapter 2: A Celebration of Peace, the Mia Pick

A Celebration of Peace, the Mia Pick.

That horsemanship tournament is now known as a worldwide event, but the fact that it was first held in the Tearmoon Empire under the auspices of the Great Sage of the Empire Mia Luna Tearmoon is also quite a famous tale.

The best riders of each country were handpicked by Mia, goddess of the moon who shines light on all lands. The riders test their skills against each other, singing each other's praises in a competition seen by the people as a way to build favorable relationships across nations.

However, there are also those who criticize the Mia Pick. It is only natural that the greater a competition becomes, the greater the number of people who look upon it unfavorably—a rule of the world even an event created by the Great Sage herself cannot escape.

Someone once said, "You call this a celebration of peace? This is nothing but a way to flaunt the strength of your cavalry, a display of military strength! It's nothing but a way to intimidate your neighbors!"

It is true that many events in the Mia Pick come from military training. It is reasonable to insist that such an event is nothing but a show of cavalry. Those words are convincing.

However, a believer in the Great Sage responded, "You only believe that because you know nothing of what the Great Sage has accomplished. Do you not know all she has dedicated to the peace on this continent? Her promises of peace are no lie and are made on no pretenses. Empress Mia espouses those principles and creates peace with her every breath."

That argument was convincing as well, and ever since, she became known as "The Holy Mother of Peace" to all on the continent. Those who called her so proclaimed that such accusations were false, and Empress Mia would never create an event for the sake of highlighting her own military strength.

But just which of these sides were right?

A student at Saint Mia Academy once asked the empress herself the following question: "With what intentions did you bring the Mia Pick, Your Majesty? Was it to find skilled riders to strengthen your cavalry? To flaunt Tearmoon's militaristic strength? To create bonds of friendship between soldiers of all countries for the goal of maintaining peace?"

That question had left the empress in shock. Her eyes were wide open, but soon, a bitter yet confounding smile instead adorned her lips. In the end, she never answered that question. But what motivations could she have in concealing her wisdom? Countless historians have racked their brains for an answer. One hypothesized that she couldn't help but grimace in surprise that her virtuous intentions had been interpreted that way by the masses. Another said that hearing her thoughts and feelings so distorted, her sadness may have left her at a loss for words. Another explained that she couldn't help but give a wry smile at the childish innocence needed to ask a question that had such an obvious answer.

Despite these countless explanations, none know her true intentions, for she never shared them. But how about this explanation? Perhaps Empress Mia had chosen to remain silent so that the answer would be left to the next generation. Would this be a celebration of peace, or would it succumb to being a simple means to flaunt power? Didn't the Great Sage decide to leave interpreting the purpose of the event to her children in the new generation? Perhaps it was a prayer that those who came next both in Tearmoon and the whole continent would wisely build a future that glowed with light.

Or perhaps, she had faith that her children would be all right, that they would take on the peace she had created and continue it into the future. As those who have received her faith, what sort of lives shall we live? That is a question I implore you all to find your own answers to.

Excerpt from the Principal's Address to the 20th Graduating Class of Saint Mia Academy

So, just what actually *were* the thoughts behind the Mia Pick, a celebration of such importance it made its way into this graduating speech?

"My... This is quite..."

The grounds for Mia's horsemanship tournament were located in the suburbs of Lunatear. The training grounds of the Ebony Moon Ministry, in charge of organizing the seven forces of Tearmoon and in control of all military affairs, was normally just a large

undecorated field. But now, that had changed; it overflowed with enthusiasm. Upon entering, Mia saw that both armies had set up camp on opposite sides of the field. To the west was the private army of the Redmoons, rumored to supersede even the regular army of Tearmoon. They held up flags adorned with large crimson moons and let out a battle cry.

On the opposite side was the Princess Guard, entrusted with guarding Princess Mia. Their flags were purple and equally large in size, and they, too, let out a cry of determined victory.

"Ugh... That flag..."

"You mean that of the Princess Guard...?" asked Ludwig, who flanked her side. He responded with a calm grin. "I received a request that a flag be made to embody their loyalty to you, Your Highness."

"I see..."

On the flag was Mia, the wings of a fairy on her back as she leaned against a crescent moon. It was quite the...*fanciful*...embroidery. Still, Mia didn't get a good look, and thus, she refrained from offering any criticism.

"I will lead you to your seat." Ludwig gestured deep into the arena to a seat positioned directly between the two armies.

"My, are those...watchtowers?"

"Yes. The Redmoons assisted us in creating some impromptu seating. They are made from what we use to judge the battlefield from up high."

Before Mia were wooden watchtowers, roughly as tall as the second floor of a castle. The top had a balcony, and beneath were seats.

"Duke Redmoon has already arrived. I believe His Majesty will be here shortly as well."

"In that case, let us head up now."

With her were Abel, Prince of Remno, and Citrina, an Etoiline. As Bel's identity had to remain secret, she would be watching the show alongside Anne and the other children.

The group climbed the stairs to find Manzana Redmoon, as well as Ruby.

"Greetings, Lord Redmoon. Allow me to thank you for agreeing to my plan," said Mia with a curtsy and a princessly smile. Yes, if Mia was dedicated, she was completely capable of acting like a princess! There was no making fun of her!

...Well, let us consider that for a moment. Mia had *always* been a princess, meaning that being unable to act princessly unless she was dedicated was, frankly, strange. Not that one would need to give it so much thought! Mia was currently doing her best to act like a proper princess, and she was succeeding in that task, which is all that's important. Yes, let us drop this matter.

With a princess-like Mia now before him, Manzana let out a jovial chuckle. "No, the pleasure is mine to be invited to such an entertaining event, Your Highness. It is quite embarrassing to admit that the excitement here has gotten even my blood boiling! Ha ha!"

Seeing his enjoyment, Mia was almost relieved, until she was hit by a surprise attack.

"Excuse me, Your Highness."

This was a cousin-shaped shift in the tides.

"Good day, Your Highness."

"My, Hildebrandt! Oho ho! I see you are quite motivated this morning."

Hildebrandt Cotillard was already dressed in his riding gear, his back held straight and an invigorated grin on his face. "I shall be ready to compete at a moment's notice. As cousins, a blunder of mine is a blunder of yours, after all. I have no intention of putting you to shame."

"Well, I am glad you are so dedicated."

Seeing Hildebrandt with so much dedication had Mia...gloating to herself. *This is perfect! If he is so serious about this battle, it will only make the shock when he loses even greater. Aima beating him to a pulp will suddenly get him interested in the Equestrian Kingdom, and then... Oho! All according to plan.*

Mia was absolutely certain that her plan was going swimmingly. This time, she was really absolutely certain that all would go well. In fact, she was so certain that she had failed to notice a seam that could easily come apart.

"You're absolutely right! Your blunders shall be... Hm?"

Something was off. Something had begun to tickle Mia's sense of danger.

A shiver made its way up her back. It felt just like...just like the moment that a large wave suddenly appears behind you just as you are at the top...that moment when you realize that it's about to swallow you whole.

Wait a moment... Hildebrandt is my cousin. Thus, any mistakes he

makes reflect badly on me… Yes, that's right. That's not wrong, but… Hm? Mia had come to a realization. *If Hildebrandt rudely refuses the proposal and declares he will head to the Equestrian Kingdom…that may hurt* my *reputation!*

Manzana believed that offering his daughter to Hildebrandt would strengthen his relationship with Mia. That was how much he saw Hildebrandt as a proper relative of Mia. And if those very relatives selfishly decided to leave for the Equestrian Kingdom, wouldn't that hurt Manzana's feelings? And if it did, the culprit would be none other than Mia's own relative—her cousin, to be exact.

Ah! I-I completely overlooked this! Ugh… I thought this would be the best way to dissolve this betrothal, but…I wasn't expecting this*!*

Mia hadn't even realized that she had let her guard down, and now, it had her gritting her teeth. Still, there may be nothing she could have done to avoid this. Hildebrandt had quickly passed away in the previous timeline, and Mia had been in no position to even mourn his death. Now, they were in the timeline where Mia had jumped into the past with a redo. She had too much to worry about to be spending time with her relatives.

Basically, Hildebrandt had been too minor an existence in Mia's psyche, and as a result, she hadn't fully come to the realization that he was, indeed, a member of her family. While she knew his failures would reflect negatively on her, she had yet to *know* it.

I was so careless… I failed…

While flabbergasted, Mia quickly regained her sea legs and began to plot her next course of action. This was because the breakfast the chef had prepared for her had been so delicious. As a special treat for the horsemanship tournament, she had been given dessert! It had used newly imported sweet beans and been absolutely scrumptious. The sugar it provided had turned to energy, kicking her brain into gear.

I will have to make this advantageous to both sides… In other words, I need to create a situation where breaking off the marriage between Hildebrandt and Ruby will benefit Duke Redmoon as well. That may as well be impossible, so at the very least, I'll need to make sure he won't really care one way or another. That should prevent this from ruining Duke Redmoon's impression of me as well. In that case…

Mia glanced over to the Princess Guard. Thankfully, their captain, Vanos, was planning to participate. And it wasn't just any

competition—he would compete in the pentathlon. The Redmoons' love for strongmen was famous, meaning this might appeal to the Duke.

Mia next glanced at Ruby. She was currently exchanging greetings with Abel and Citrina, but...Mia hadn't heard any talk of her and Vanos's relationship making any progress. Not a single peep, or even anything that could lead to a peep.

Ruby's more chickenhearted than I was expecting. How surprising, considering we're related. Well, I suppose Esmeralda and Sapphias are quite the cowards as well. Perhaps Rina and I are just the exceptions... Mia sighed. *While I was planning on staying out of this one, I suppose I have no choice but to push Manzana toward Vanos.*

"Ha ha! I eagerly await seeing how you will ride Skyred Hare, Lord Hildebrandt," said Manzana.

Those words had Mia coming back to her senses, and she spoke in a half-panic. "Yes, but I do hope you will enjoy seeing the bravery and valor of my prized Princess Guard as well. Many great men have gathered under their captain."

"I very much look forward to seeing whether they or my personal army come out on top," he said with a grin.

"Oho! I most certainly do not intend to lose." Mia proudly looked from Manzana to Hildebrandt.

The Mia Pick... While it would later be known as a celebration of peace, there were few who knew its origins lay in overflowing love (of Ruby for Vanos) and passion (of Mia desperately wanting to see the love between a noble and commoner so typical in romance novels play out in real life). Still, no matter how selfish the thoughts behind the event, that love and passion led to peace, making it undeniably a simple, wonderful celebration of it...hopefully, at least.

Chapter 3: Let the Races Begin

After Mia used her captivating stepwork to avoid her father's "call me papa!" attack after he had arrived late, Mia was faced with her next big role—the opening remarks for the tournament.

"Well then, let us begin with some words from Her Highness."

The group that had gathered before the audience seats included the private army of Duke Redmoon and the Princess Guard. Mia looked at their faces and gave an invigorated "Hmph!" In all honesty, this was quite the unreasonable request...but it didn't perturb Mia. She had already overcome letting situations like this get to her.

She stood and gambled over to the front of the seats to look down at the soldiers below. After a deep breath, she began. "Welcome, everyone. I am so thankful you have all taken the time out of your days to appease my selfish request," she said with a grin.

First, I need to raise the morale of the Princess Guard. After all, their performance would reflect on Vanos. While it seemed that they were already in quite high spirits, Mia chose to make double assurances as she began to speak once again. "It was a particularly unexpected joy that the knights of Duke Redmoon agreed to face off against my Princess Guard," she said, still grinning. "I hear that the forces of Lord Redmoon are the best Tearmoon has to offer. I look forward to seeing a performance befitting such a reputation."

Those words came out naturally and were as smooth as butter. They were an attempt to curry Manzana's favor, of course, but what Mia was more concerned about was...

The higher the wave, the more credit you receive when you ride right over it! Should the Princess Guard be able to match the elite Redmoon forces in this battle, their reputation would rise as well. And obviously, it would inspire Manzana's interest in what sort of elite served as their captain.

That doesn't change the fact that Vanos has no title, but I first need to get him on Manzana's good side. Thus, after first complimenting

the private army of the Redmoons, she next turned to her own Princess Guard.

"And to those of the Princess Guard...you have my deepest thanks for all the work you do for me. I know you have been especially busy as of late, so first, I want to tell you this: good job. I mean it with all my heart." Mia was calm as she spoke. There was no deception in her words—Mia knew that their efforts were what was keeping her away from the guillotine. Of course she had some words of thanks. In fact, they had moved some of the soldiers in the crowd so deeply that tears now formed in their eyes. The loyalty of the Princess Guard was just as deep as those of the empress faction.

"Given the pressure you are under, I understand that holding such an event may only add to your stress. As much as I would like to ask that you view this competition lightly and with the goal of enjoyment...I cannot." Mia's expression turned stern. "You are my prized swords and shields. While you may yet be inferior in name to the Redmoons' army, I know that you excel equally in abilities." With that, Mia turned to the audience. "Both His Majesty—my father—and Duke Redmoon have gathered here today. This is the perfect chance to prove your true strength! I look forward to your spectacular victory!"

Mia returned her expression to a kind smile. "Well then, these are my final words. While you are about to face off against one another, both armies are part of our glorious Tearmoon Empire. When the match has concluded, rather than quarrel, I wish that you all take pride in each other's strength as comrades."

Mia did not wish for this tournament to sour her relationship with the army of the Redmoons. If things really came down to it, she still needed them to protect her! Thus, she clarified that even should a competitive spirit be what currently was driving them, that only could apply to the duration of the match.

"And for that sake, I would like to ask that you all avoid injury and refrain from pushing yourselves too hard as competitors."

Spilled blood meant remaining ill will... Well, of course that's true, but even more importantly, an injury among the Princess Guard may hinder the supply chain of provisions. Mia didn't want that either! Thus, she made sure to highlight the importance of staying within your limits.

Then, she offered her final words: "With that said, let the fun begin!" Having made sure her plan that this would be a fun

diversion was the last thing she would leave behind, she gracefully turned around and made her way back to her seat.

"In that case, it is time for both armies to return to their encampments. After that, the first race will begin. We will proceed in order, so please make sure you are participating in the proper race. Judges, please head to your assigned positions..."

As Ludwig barked out orders, the emperor spoke to Mia. "The final Horse Dance is what you will be appearing in?"

"Yes... Wait, you seem quite tired, father."

"Ha! I was just so pleased you would invite me to such an event that I was unable to sleep last night."

Hearing this from the sidelines, Manzana began to grin. "So, we are the same, Your Majesty. Ruby has been quite distant as of late, but I could not help how merry it made me for her to invite me here today."

"Ha ha! I see. We truly are the same."

The two men shared a jovial chuckle as Mia, Ruby, and even Citrina looked on with grimaces.

Chapter 4: An Excited Bunch...

Quite honestly...the Princess Guard had agreed to this horsemanship tournament with a slight sense of foreboding. Every action the Great Sage had taken up until this point had a clear reason. The protection of provisions that they had been so busy with recently was the penultimate example of how important they believed their work to be, and thus, they did not consider their busyness to be a problem.

However, this horsemanship tournament seemed to be a bit...different. They had been told it was meant as a thanks, a fun event where they could let down their hair. However...

"Well, it's true that being tasked with such nerve-racking work all the time can get a bit painful. I suppose she's kind enough to prepare some fun for us so we can catch a break" was how the majority of soldiers took it, even those who would be competing. In any case, rather than having fun, they were more focused on her final advice of "don't get hurt." Still...

"...You all heard Her Highness, right?"

"Yes, every last word."

As soon as the Princess Guard returned to their encampment, they began to whisper among themselves.

"Princess Mia called us her pride! The Great Sage said we were both her sword and shield..." Those who had once been members of the imperial guard held their heads high with pride at her words. Given their strong loyalty, that was the highest compliment they could receive.

On the other hand, those who had once served under Dion had a different reaction. "So we've gotta beat the Redmoons. Her Highness always picks just the right words."

Dion's men had seen countless battles, and to them, the army of the Redmoons was la crème de la crème. Their skills with the sword and the bow—along with horses—were top class, and yet Princess Mia had commanded that they win against these strong opponents, brazenly declaring that they had a road to victory. In a future now

no longer, even the eldest men trained by Dion Alaia were wiped out by the Holy Aquarian Army. And what impression had Mia's words left on such men?

"Just as I would expect from Her Highness. What great words! If she commands it, we have no choice but to do so..."

"Of course we do. No need to say it aloud."

The men wore ferocious grins, and their morale knew no bounds as it climbed as high as the heavens.

"She has given us this opportunity to show our strength! In the name of her kindness, you lot better give this everything you've got!"

Those words were addressed to none other than the cavalry chosen to represent them in this tournament. They let out a fierce battle cry and a, "Leave it to us!" Then, with the encouraging cheers of their comrades behind them, they dashed their way to their steeds.

The army of the Redmoons had also grown invigorated. For one, the Princess Guard boasted many female soldiers chosen from *their* ranks, led by their precious Lady Ruby. While they had been granted the high honor of being chosen as members of Princess Mia's personal guard, there was still something about it that left the army of the Redmoons...not entirely satisfied.

"This is our chance for revenge! Instigation on our part was impossible, but Her Highness has prepared this chance for us herself... We must leave them embarrassed! They must lose face with Her Highness!"

"Yes, and we can't ignore that speech either! She commanded them to use their horse skills to defeat us!"

The soldiers under Duke Redmoon had pride in their forces. Mia complimenting them as the strongest Tearmoon had to offer only sounded natural in their ears—yes, they were undeniably the most elite soldiers in the empire, and thus, they could never lose to the Princess Guard. Still, Mia had commanded the Princess Guard to win; it had hurt their pride.

"As subjects of Tearmoon, we have nothing but love and respect for Her Highness Princess Mia. Thus...we cannot ignore this gaffe. It would only reflect poorly on her! To correct her lapse in judgment, we must go a step above and beyond in this battle! Do you all hear me?!"

Hearing these words from this leader, the crowd erupted in cheers.

Seeing both encampments so invigored from afar, Mia nodded in satisfaction. *Both sides are ready to give this their all! This should be enough to leave Duke Redmoon satisfied. They really do leave quite the impact...*

Then, after a short moment, the first match began—a competition of pure speed.

"By the way, Lord Redmoon, what sort of horses does your family keep?" asked Mia.

"The majority are terretortues. We have quite a few mixed breeds as well... Though, yes, I suppose terretortues make up the vast majority of our ranks."

Terretortues were a breed of workhorse that Tearmoon took great pride in. While they paled in comparison to moonhares when it came to speed, they boasted an overwhelming toughness and stability.

"Oho, terretortues... That's Dongfeng's breed. In which case, there should be little difference between horses, meaning this race should come down to the skill of the rider..." mumbled Mia with the snobbish air of a commentator. Then, she made a display of crossing her arms with a "Hmph!"

Chapter 5: The Ladies Attack Head-On!

The horsemanship tournament kicked off with a simple race around the track. And as little as this matters, it should be noted that the final, brilliant closing act of this tournament would be none other than Mia's gallant Horse Dance. This also meant that the preceding display of talent would lead to the audience having equal expectations for Mia's event, but...she'll be okay. Hopefully. Anyways...

"My, they're quite impressive." Mia watched the passionate race without a thought in her head as she let out a sigh. "When I rode a similar race with Kuolan, the ground was awfully rugged, but it's quite enjoyable to see a proper race on such well-maintained grounds as well!" Mia couldn't help but lean out of her seat as she cheered on the competitors.

"I suffered quite the loss back then," said Ruby with a bitter grin. But then, she tilted her head as if a thought had suddenly occurred to her. "But Miss Mia, if the grounds had been in good condition back then, how did you plan to beat me?"

"Hm? Why...that's a secret!" said Mia with a (seemingly) all-knowing grin. There is, of course, no need to write this out, but Mia had absolutely no idea how to beat Ruby. Even utilizing the wet conditions of the track had been *Kuolan*'s idea, not Mia's. She had no strategy from the start. Thus...she deflected with a smile and decided to change the subject!

"Ah, um... That's right! I almost forgot to mention this to you, Ruby, but I plan on using this tournament to push Manzana toward Vanos."

"...Huh?" This surprise attack had left Ruby at a loss for words. She stared at Mia with her mouth agape, an expression hardly befitting a lady of her standing. Incidentally, this was a face Mia herself often made.

“Wha— H-Huh? Hm?”

“Shhh! You’re speaking too loud, Ruby.” Mia brought her finger to her lips and flashed Ruby a gentle smile. “Listen up. If this goes well, talks of your betrothal will fall through, but that will only mean delaying your engagement. In any case, we need to use another strategy... We must go on the attack!”

“Y-You mean trying to sell Captain Vanos to my father...?” asked Ruby, looking like a loyal puppy.

Mia nodded. “Exactly. We can’t just remove Hildebrandt as a marriage prospect for you. We need to make moves that will put Vanos in his place!” Mia persuaded—yes, persuaded—Ruby with everything she had. For one thing, unless Mia could convince Manzana that there were better partners out there for Ruby than Hildebrandt, Mia would be unable to avoid a blow to her reputation. Manzana was a military man, and Mia desperately wanted to be on good terms with him. She had to take this seriously. “First, we show Manzana Vanos’s appeal. We make sure he knows exactly who Vanos is, and that he views Vanos as a promising man!” Mia whispered with vigor, and Ruby nodded along with a serious scowl.

“In that case...I doubt there will be an issue. Captain Vanos is an excellent man... Even just one look at him should get my father to understand his charm. His muscles, after all...” she trailed off, breaking into a fit of giggles.

As these two high-class ladies carried on their...questionable...conversation, the race continued.

“Hm... My Princess Guard seems quite evenly matched with the Redmoons, at least for now.”

During the first half of the race, things had been even. The terretortues were known for their toughness and stability, so it was no wonder that none suffered any large setbacks. The race was neck and neck, and it was still anyone’s game.

During the first race, which was five laps, one of Duke Redmoon’s men had claimed victory. In the next race, which was three laps, a member of the Princess Guard had won, and in the final one-lap race, a member of the Princess Guard had barely scraped his way to victory.

“My, his name was...Toni, I believe. He’s quite skilled,” muttered Mia as she watched his victory lap. While this may be too obvious to deserve mention, Mia knew every name and face of the Princess Guard’s competitors. They were her swords and shields, after all, and if the flames of revolution ever nipped at their doorsteps, they were also those who would be risking their lives to protect her. Asking, “So, who were you again?” would hurt their morale. She didn’t want any of them carelessly lowering their shields and telling her, “Oops, sorry I couldn’t protect you!”

To avoid such perilous circumstances, Mia spent day and night pushing her brain to its limits, making sure to expend all the sugar she had consumed that day. Eating too much sugar was just proof she was making proper use of her brains! At least, Mia hoped so.

“This must mean Captain Vanos has trained them well... Right, Ruby?” Mia glanced at Ruby, and then took a moment to study Manzana.

With the conversation now turned on her, Ruby gave a triumphant grin. “Yes, you’re exactly right. Captain Vanos is passionate in his teaching. He’s amazingly skilled, and amazingly muscular... His men also make sure to train themselves well.”

“My, he really is wonderful. It’s comforting to know I’m protected by someone with such bulging muscles...”

The person overhearing this conversation was none other than...Citrina. She looked on curiously, but then, her face turned to understanding as she nodded and joined the conversation. “Yes, it is reassuring to know that you have such an enormous man protecting you, Miss Mia. He is built like a bear... Rina, too, would find comfort in having such a man as my guard.”

She had completely picked up on what they were laying down! Citrina really knew how to read a room.

The three girls tried to make Vanos seem as appealing as possible, and one of the men sitting next to them began to show interest. It was Duke Redmoon! Just kidding, it was the emperor, who had been sitting beside Manzana and watching the match. “Oho... Muscles... I could be a dad you find comfort in... I see...”

His mutterings had left Mia trembling in fear. “Oh, um... Father? There is no need for you to train yourself...”

A vision flashed through Mia’s mind: her father, built like a bear, chasing after her and yelling, “Call me papa!” She hurried to dissuade her father from his plans. Then, she glanced at Duke

Manzana Redmoon.

"What's gotten into you lot?! The cavalry of us Redmoons are not such easy losers! Hang in there till your very last breath!" He wasn't listening at all! While he was more of a laid-back man than a passionate one... Well, let's just say that horses are sinful animals that can lure humans into a frenzy. "While your men are quite skilled, Your Highness, the skills needed on a battlefield are not just those of horsemanship. The real battle is still yet to come."

He sent Mia a passionate glance, which Mia responded to by saying, "Oho ho! I accept your challenge. The captain of my Princess Guard is *amazingly* skilled. Especially noteworthy is the fact he doesn't pressure me to call him papa!"

...Their efforts to sell Vanos had started to go astray.

Chapter 6: The Girls Make Their Move

With the three tests of speed and the obstacle race completed, the first half of the tournament was over, heralding in a short break.

"I see; those jumps were wonderful... I should follow their example." To prepare for the Horse Dance, Mia had practiced her jumps countless times. The obstacle race required similar movements, and watching the competitors really did give an example for Mia to follow. Being well-acquainted with the horsemanship of the Equestrian Kingdom, Mia had quite the eyes for these things, but the soldiers had exhibited skills that had even Mia oohing in awe. "That last jump was truly something. They appeared to be floating."

"Yes, it was quite an impressive sight," said Abel who was watching the races from beside her. They exchanged grins.

"Ah... This is true bliss." Just as she was about to melt into that bliss...she suddenly stopped. *Wait! I forgot that we were trying to sell Vanos!* Yes, being next to Abel always hindered Mia's ability to remain in serious mode. *While it is all fine that he's getting so into this competition...this isn't enough to impress Manzana.*

Mia glanced over at him. His eyes were locked on the racehorses, but he seemed to be giving the Princess Guard little attention. While Ruby and Mia had been doing their best as salesmen (for example, explaining that a certain soldier had been trained by the captain himself, or saying that any great rider could hold no candle to the captain...they really were quite blatant about it) it seemed to be having little effect. Horses were the only thing currently on Manzana's mind.

We'll have to divert his attention to Vanos's skills themselves. Well, that's what I was planning, anyway... I suppose I should head over to try to get Vanos a bit more fired up.

Suddenly, a voice called out to Mia. "I'm sorry, but could you come with me for a moment?"

"My, Citrina! Where to?"

Citrina whispered into Mia's airs with a charming, lovely smile.

“Rina’s worried about the children. I thought we could check up on them...”

By “children,” she meant Bel. Mia translated this internally and nodded with a sigh. *I see how it is. With my father here, she first stayed to watch the game with him...and now, she’s sneaking away to watch with her friends.*

Not only did she carry out her duties as an Etoiline, but she was also dead set on playing with her friends! This was Citrina’s true power! Well, anyways...

“In that case, I’d be glad to come with you. But first, I do have to change.” Having decided to give Vanos some encouragement, she met up with Anne...but there was someone listening from the sidelines.

“What?! You are leaving already?! Can’t you stay for a tad longer?” These complaints, of course, were voiced by none other than the emperor.

While Mia did begin to think *Ugh, he’s so annoying*, she did not voice those thoughts. For one, Mia would be sixteen this winter. She had already grown into a wonderful young lady capable of letting such things slide with her adult attitude.

...No, hold that thought. Mia had been twenty when she first returned to the past, and there were never exactly signs of her being a “wonderful young lady...” But, let us not concern ourselves with such minor details.

Mia responded calmly. “My, but father, if I don’t prepare now, I won’t be able to participate in my Horse Dance. Would you be all right with that?”

“Urk... No, b-but that...would be so...terrible... Uuuurgh...” The emperor moaned and groaned. Then, he suddenly clapped his hands. “Oh, that’s right. Are the other children here as well?”

“The other children...? If you mean Patty and Bel, they’re down below, but...”

“Then we absolutely must invite them here!”

“Are... Are you sure, father?”

This was the emperor of a mighty nation, after all. Could he really be so easily inviting people who were practically strangers to come hang out with him? Mia asked that very question.

“But they’re not strangers! They’re children looked after by you. Right, Mia? That knowledge alone is enough.”

“Father...” Hearing the trust behind his words, Mia couldn’t

help but feel a bit moved...

"Those kids look just like you, after all! That's enough for me!"

...Until he said that, that is. Then, she was just fed up. *That's right. Father always spoiled Bel just because he could see me in her...* And not just that. Right now, Patty was here, who looked just like his mother (because she was). He had no reason to hesitate when it came to inviting them here.

"They say both emperors and children like to watch from above! I'm sure they would love to watch from here," he said with a childlike laugh.

Mia turned to the other top brass man sitting beside Matthias, Duke Redmoon. He put on a pleasant grin and said, "If His Majesty wills it, I have no reason to say otherwise. After all...horses are best when enjoyed together!"

That last part was clearly inspired by pure horse-mania. Mia couldn't help but marvel at its ubiquitous presence.

With a sigh, Mia now turned to Citrina, worried that she might prefer to spend time with her friends somewhere more relaxing.

"In that case, this humble Rina will go fetch them," she said with her usual composure.

That's right... Rina was never the type to feel nervous around the emperor...

Now convinced, Mia nodded. " I will be going as well, father." Mia turned around when another voice called out.

"Please wait, Miss Mia. I shall go too." Ruby stood up with a stiff expression.

"Hm? What's gotten into you, Ruby?" asked her father.

She turned around swiftly. "As vice-captain, I should encourage our competing soldiers."

"The competing soldiers...?" Manzana gave an understanding nod. "I see. That is quite important. Go and give *him* my greetings."

It was clear that "him" was not in reference to Vanos. Manzana most likely surmised that Ruby was headed to encourage the young man she was to be betrothed to, Hildebrandt. Having realized this, Ruby's expression fell dark. "Right. Well then, please enjoy yourself, father. I hope you will see just how brave and powerful my Princess Guard is."

With that, Ruby was gone.

Chapter 7: The Men Behind the Scenes

"Anything off?" Within the grounds of the horsemanship tournament, two men were in conversation just a ways away from the Princess Guard's encampment. One of them was eye-catchingly huge: none other than Vanos, Captain of the Princess Guard.

"Nope, all's fine as of now. None have tried to approach the audience, and we've got all the places a bowman could shoot from covered." The man who responded, Ogen, was also a member of the Princess Guard.

Today's horsemanship tournament was meant to be an opportunity for them to let loose. However, a portion of the soldiers still had to be dedicated to their continuous task of serving as Mia's guards. While Ogen's sword arm wasn't quite as good as Vanos's, none held a candle to him when it came to loyalty. His devotion was so strong it left the impression that even should he be the last surviving member of the Princess Guard, he would still fight alone till the very end. Vanos had placed absolute trust in him.

"The imperial guard is serving us well today as well," added Ogen. As a former member of the imperial guard, he was able to communicate with them effectively to secure the grounds. Had it been left to Vanos, things would doubtfully have gone so smoothly.

"Huh, well, they can't be letting up if His Majesty's here enjoying himself. Should be impossible for anyone to make a pass on Her Highness with how well we've got this place locked down," he muttered, mostly to himself. But then, he shook his head. "No, there's no room for carelessness. Our squad's also gotta look out for Her Highness, and her friends too."

The way Vanos saw it, Mia was the one in most danger here. To them, her importance had already superseded not only the Four Dukes, but the emperor himself. They were certain that Tearmoon's peace—though imperfect—was all thanks to her efforts.

That goes for the first time I met her too.

Vanos had first met Mia during their conflict with the Lulu tribe. She had demanded that they protect her and get her back to

friendly territory, and even Vanos couldn't help but be annoyed by how much of a spoiled and selfish brat she seemed to be. But at the same time, he was thanking Lady Luck for the excuse to retreat.

Looking back on it, that must've all been a part of her plans... She's really something. Supporting Tearmoon and protecting the girl who had saved his life only seemed like the natural option to Vanos. *I'd usually have to be worrying about the emperor now too, but the imperial guard's gotta have that covered. My focus is on Her Highness.*

As a soldier serving the empire, his top priority should be the emperor. But this time, he decided to ignore that principle. *We're Her Highness's personal guard, aren't we? Should be no problem focusing on just Her Highness herself... At least I've got that excuse. Seems like His Majesty's got quite the soft spot for her too...*

"Working hard?"

A voice suddenly called out to Vanos. His hand shot toward his sword, but once he saw the owner of the voice, he sighed. "Captain Dion, you've gotta stop sneaking up on people..."

"My bad. Old habits," he said with a loose wave of his hand and a grimace. "But *you're* the captain now, aren't you?"

"Ha ha! You're right. Seems like I've still got my own old habits," he said while scratching his head. "So, Captain...Sir Dion. You here to protect the princess as well?"

"Yup. Seems like a foe I've got my eye on has made it here to Tearmoon..." he said, folding his arms. Then, he turned toward the Princess Guard with a squint. "Seems like you've built quite the squad for yourself."

"Ha ha! They're the men trained under the centurion Captain Dion. Their results are above and beyond no matter where they go."

"And half are from the imperial guard, not to mention some of Duke Redmoon's soldiers are in the mix too. Your orders aren't just to fight, you've gotta protect and listen to the whims of our capricious princess. Oh, not to mention protecting those provision squadrons." Dion shrugged in exasperation. "Sounds like a pain. I'd be sorry if I were you, but...it seems like it's all coming together, Captain Vanos," he said with a grin.

"You've got me blushing hearing words like that from you. It's Miss Ruby who really does it all... Lady Redmoon's a hard worker."

"Is she? I was thinking that having the daughter of Duke Redmoon as your vice would be nothing but suffocating..."

Vanos dismissed Dion's surprise with a shrug. "I thought the

same. Ended up being a fortunate miscalculation!" he said with a belly laugh. Once his joking was done, his smile grew kind. "She's really working hard for us. She listens to the orders of a commoner like me and always knows what the goal of those orders are. I owe it all to her."

His tone caught Dion by surprise. "So *that's* your type. Had no idea."

"Ha ha! Were I twenty years younger, I may have entertained that fairy tale." He simply laughed it off, but it left Dion with a bitter grin.

"Guess it really could be nothing but a fairy tale. A common-born knight like you and a noblewoman of a great house like her...it's so ridiculous it's got me red in the face..." Then suddenly, Dion remembered something. "Y'know, the little princess is actually quite fond of such stories. We better not make fun of it too much now."

"You think?" responded Vanos with a scowl.

Dion nodded. "What'd she say again...? I hear that she and her other noble friends read those kinda stories. Being a member of the Princess Guard, you might just have to entertain her. You should ask her about it yourself if you get the chance."

Speak of the devil—at that exact moment, they caught sight of Mia heading toward them, Ruby, Citrina, and even Aima in tow. Mia appeared to be caught off guard by the sight of Dion, and the next moment, Aima slipped behind her back faster than sound.

"Ha ha! I see you've got fans...Sir...Dion."

"If only we could go back to how she was when we first met," responded Dion with a bitter grin.

Chapter 8: Just like I Thought!

With Ruby and Citrina in tow, Mia alighted from the audience seats.

"Hm... Perhaps I should meet with Anne and change before meeting Vanos...though I really wouldn't want to risk missing his competition. Just what to do... Hm?" As Mia was mumbling to herself, she caught sight of Aima brushing Keilai's fur.

"Ah, Princess Mia." Aima slowly turned around to reveal an expression that could best be described as...lax.

"My, what's gotten into you, Aima? You seem to be enjoying yourself."

"How could I not? Lacking humor on a joyous day like today would be impossible," she replied, practically jumping up and down in excitement. "Ah, it has been so long since my heart has beaten like this. My blood is boiling. At the Matching of Steeds that was to decide my clan's fate, I was unable to join the battle..." Her eyes unfocused as she looked into the distance. "At that time, I felt...dissatisfaction, but I shall clear it all away today. Ha ha! I am afraid of nothing! Keilai and I are starving for a battle!" she declared with a ferocious roar.

Mia was relieved to see she could rely on her. She grunted with a nod. "It seems that Hildebrandt will be dealt with... That just leaves Vanos." Mia looked toward the Princess Guard to find the man in question. The soldiers sat on the temporarily constructed benches while a gate separated the arena from the audience stand which Vanos's large figure leaned against. "There he is. Oho ho! Vanos really does stick out from afar."

"Oh? I see you are headed to greet the riders of Tearmoon. I shall accompany you." Aima excitedly hopped on board...but by Vanos's side was Dion. She jumped into the air with an "Eek!" and ran behind Mia. It seems that she was still afraid of Dion.

Aima's brother, the wolfmaster, is quite skilled... Finding someone who far outmatches him with a sword despite his strength is bound to be terrifying.

Mia grinned, Aima still behind her. “Greetings, Vanos. And I see you are here as well, Dion.”

“Ah, if it isn’t the little miss...I mean, Your Highness. Aren’t you the rude one, not offering me an invitation to an exciting competition like this?”

“Oho! Had this been a swordsmanship tournament, I would have had you show off your skills...but I suppose it would take the fun out of things if you were one of the competitors. It just wouldn’t be fair.”

“Maybe. In another five years, you should hold the event. I’m sure your darling Prince Charming will have grown up quite nicely by then.”

As they conversed, Dion suddenly looked to Mia’s side. What first entered his vision was Citrina, but...

“A-Ah, u-um, D-Dion Alaia...”

...for some inexplicable reason, she was shivering uncomfortably.

My? It’s not just Aima that has a hard time with Dion, but Rina too? Well, I suppose she is related to the Serpents. The fear of fighting against him may still be around...

Mia was a tad worried. If possible, she wanted all her comrades to get along.

“Oh, if it isn’t the royal daughter of Duke Yellowmoon. It’s been a while. Not since the Equestrian Kingdom, I think.” Dion offered a formal-for-his-standards greeting, but for some reason, it only dyed Citrina’s cheeks red.

“Is something wrong, Rina?”

“Huh? Oh... No. I-It’s nothing...” With that, Citrina cleared her throat and returned her expression to her usual sweet smile. “Greetings, Dion Alaia. I see you are brimming with bloodlust like always. The poor princess of the Equestrian Kingdom is terribly afraid. Being so heartless will not make you popular with women,” she said, looking at Aima.

“Ha ha! I’m just glad you’re smiling, Miss Yellowmoon,” he responded with a grin.

“My? Are you interested in Rina’s smile? I heard you had little interest in girls twenty years your junior, but perhaps you had a change of heart?” Her smile was as sweet as usual, but now with a teasing tint.

Dion responded. “Of course I’ve got no interest. It’s a matter of

boredom. I may not get bored of looking at the tears of a noble lady in her prime like herself, but…" He looked at Citrina and shook his head. "The tears of a crybaby get boring. No fun in looking at that. But if you'd show a delightfully flustered face like the kind Her Highness makes, I don't think I'd get bored of that…"

"Huh?!" Rina couldn't help but pout.

Watching the two, Mia nodded in satisfaction. *It seems like they don't* not *get along. I'm gla— Wait. Did he just speak poorly of me? Or was "delightfully" meant to be a compliment?* This casual slight had Mia folding her arms with a scowl. *Hm, well…I suppose it's better that Dion considers me delightful rather than undelightful. Yup.*

Mia was magnanimous after all. Even before a snack like the Miacake, as long as it was tasty she was willing to look the other way. This didn't get to her in the slightest.

As Mia was pondering this over, their conversation continued. Preparing for a counterattack, Citrina thought for a short while. Then, as if she had thought of the perfect comeback, she put on a proud smile, took a deep breath, and…

"So, these are the days of your young love, Rina…" a voice suddenly came from behind, causing Citrina to erupt into a scream.

"Huh?! B-Bel? Wh-Why are— When did you…?"

Bel simply puffed out her chest and said, "I saw you and Miss Mia come down during the break, so I brought everyone to come meet you all! But…" Bel's grin grew even wider. She was really enjoying this. "I'm relieved! So you and General Dion really are…"

"N-No! You've got the wrong idea, Bel! Rina…Rina, um…" She tried to defend herself in a panic, but Bel dismissed her with a wave of her hand.

"Tee hee! No need, Rina. I understand!" Bel patted Citrina on the shoulders with a kind smile.

Seeing her expression, Citrina let out a silent scream.

Chapter 9: General of Love Mia Offers Words of Wisdom!

"I do look forward to seeing your skills today, Vanos." Watching Bel and Citrina's heartwarming back-and-forth from the corner of her eye, Mia returned her attention to Vanos. "I don't believe I've seen your skills on a horse before, even if I have seen Dion's abnormal strength plenty."

Vanos's job was keeping Dion in line. To Mia, this made him incredibly important. Still, she had yet to see his true strength with both a sword and a horse.

"Ha ha! Now that you bring it up, that's true, isn't it? I'll do my best to live up to your expectations, Your Highness." There was absolute honesty in his hearty grin.

Suddenly, Mia had grown emotional. "Thinking back...the feud with the Lulu Tribe was quite a while ago. I've known you for quite some time." Considering that he was supposed to die in the conflict, it only made her emotions stronger.

"Indeed. Ever since, you've led me down a path of glory," he said in complete seriousness. "If I can, I'd like to stay working the proud job of being one of your guards, Your Highness. Today's the perfect opportunity for that. I'll show you what your knights got."

"Oho! I look forward to it, Vanos."

"Captain Vanos." Ruby had silently been by Mia's side, but now, she took a step forward. "I wish you luck out there. I know you will win." Her hands were linked in front of her chest as if in prayer.

"Ha ha! Thanks for trusting me, but...I don't think you've ever gotten to see me on horseback either, Vice-Captain," he said, tilting his head as if he couldn't quite grasp her words.

Ruby shook her head. And then...for some reason...she looked as if she'd gathered her courage and was ready to make her move!

"No. I know exactly how skilled you are. After all, I...I...lo—"

Holy moons! Hold on a second there, Ruby! You're going to confess

your feelings now*?!*

This sudden, near-criminal act had left Mia flustered. A love confession like this completely out of the blue was not what Mia had been expecting. But it was too late to stop her now. All Mia could do was watch on with a nervous gulp.

"I lo...lo..." Her mouth moved, but no actual words came out. "I'm loath to think that your skills on a horse would be low enough to sully the name of those under you like me!" Her face was as stiff as a stone as she finally croaked out those words.

"I see. I do have the lady of House Redmoon working under me, I suppose. Ha ha! It's true. I can't just lose here, huh?" He let out a belly laugh with one of his hearty smiles as Ruby let out a worn sigh...but then, she gathered herself once again.

"While you are competing, I will keep an eye on Her Highness. Please, don't worry and put your all into the race." Unlike Mia's simple words of encouragement, those words cut away any anxiety that could be had about the future, firmly pushing his back from behind. They were the words of a vice to her captain...the words of someone who shared the weight of his responsibilities.

Vanos blinked, clearly surprised by her words. "If my vice, daughter of Duke Redmoon, is giving me words like that, I've got no choice but to do my best."

"Right now, I'm just Ruby, Vice-Captain of the Princess Guard, not the daughter of Duke Redmoon. Please feel no reserve and do your all to win, Captain." With that, she turned around and walked away, her shoulders sagging with melancholy.

Hm, this could... Mia had opened her eyes to a new, grave danger. She quickly walked her way toward Ruby and whispered in her ear. "Ruby...did you come here to confess?"

Ruby responded with a gasp and a shiver. She looked toward Mia with a frown that could inspire nothing but pity. "Is this...really all the courage I have? I've always wanted to tell him...and they're words I could say at any time! So just why can't I...?"

Her expression was the heartrending tears of a young woman in love. But...within her words, Mia found an undeniable fallacy!

"I see. It's true you may not have courage, Ruby. But had you carried out your intentions, that would not have been courage, but recklessness."

"Huh...?" Ruby was dumbfounded, but Mia responded in the tone of someone sharing an unwavering truth of this world.

“There is something important which you lack.”

“And that is…?” Ruby’s expression was firm, and she fixed her posture.

Mia puffed out her chest and proudly declared, “I am sure it’s something you know well: *timing*.” She spoke like a famous general seasoned by countless battles.

“T-Timing?!” She stepped backward as if receiving a huge shock.

Mia grinned, her tone now kind. “Perhaps another word we could use is opportunity. In any case, you need to rethink your idea that your feelings are something that you can share at any time. Fruits can only be reaped once seeds are sown and flowers bloom, and those seeds must be sown at the right time, nurtured at the right time, and reaped at the right time. Are battles not the same? You must attack when it is right and defend when it is right.” This General of Love folded her arms. “There is a time for everything, and there is a time to share your feelings. It’s a mistake to think you can share them at any time.”

No matter how you spun it, professing your love at a time like this was unthinkable—this was a lesson learned from Mia’s accumulated knowledge…of romance novels! Of all times, the one Ruby’d chosen had to be the worst!

“I can’t say it…whenever…” Ruby gulped as Mia shook her head.

“Moons, I didn’t think you’d be so clueless when it came to love! We’ll have to teach you these things together.” With that, Mia called for her maid. “Anne, come here please.”

“Yes, milady.” She stepped forward, her face expressionless as she bowed.

“My apologies, but could you prepare some reading materials for Ruby about the basics of love? Hm… Elise’s *Her Highness’s Great Love!* should be a good place to start.”

“Understood. I shall prepare them as quickly as I can.”

“Let’s go through some textbooks. You have no need to worry. Matters of love come easier to me than making horse-shaped bread!”

With that, it was decided that Ruby would be trained in matters of love by General of Love Mia and her strategist Anne. Hopefully, she’d be all right.

Chapter 10: The Great Sage Knows Everything About Riding!

After showering Ruby with a pompous lecture, Mia hurried as fast as she could back to the tent in order to change into her riding gear. This set was new and specifically made for her Horse Dance, and it was a tad gaudy. Her hat was in the shape of a crescent moon and adorned with fluffy feathers, and what wrapped around her body was blue and inspired by Tearmoon's military uniform. A red cape flowed down her back, either an homage to the scarves used during the student council election or in consideration of Duke Redmoon. Finally, she put on the riding boots Abel had gifted her and checked herself in the mirror.

"Yup! Looks good."

She gave a satisfied nod and headed back to the grounds. After Ludwig had given the nod on her outfit, the games began once again. The next competition was a team race—a relay carried out by four soldiers on horseback, similar to how a message might be sent. The first rider would do one lap, the second two, and the third three, so that the length gradually increased as they delivered their letter. The fourth rider would take up the rear and need to gallop four laps.

Incidentally, a single lap was 1500 m (moontales) long, making four laps a whopping 6000 m. If it was Mia, it would probably take half a day to run that distance even at full speed. But really, it would have been impossible for Mia to ride such a distance in the first place.

It's amazing that there are horses who can run such a long distance. They really are to be treasured...

Mia's love for horses had been renewed. Even as Princess of thy Winged Horse, she still had affections for the unwinged variety.

Your order in the relay really decides how trying this race will be. Watching it go down... It somehow starts to feel personal.

In Tearmoon's long history, just how many princesses had lived

in peace? Had she been born just two or three generations earlier, she wouldn't have had to work so hard. It was difficult not to feel *some* vexation with that in mind.

Ugh... I really was born in the wrong generation. If only I had been born as that first horse. The distance I'd have to go would be so short, and my life would be so easy...

Had she, there'd be no hard work, and she could spend her days a lazy hedonist in bed, able to summon cake to her by a mere clap of her hands, and...

"Is something wrong, milady?" Anne was looking at her, worried. It brought Mia back to the real world.

Cake would come to me at a mere beckon, but...that's right. Had I been born earlier, Anne would never have flung that cake on me. Mia's smile grew bitter. *Yes... Had I been born in a different time, I never would have met Ludwig or Anne, and maybe, I still would have had to work hard.* The Serpents had still existed in the past. Just what would have happened to her had she been born at a time like that without her friends? *I'm certain that Patty will have to suffer and work hard too...*

Unlike Mia, Patty didn't know who she could trust. Suddenly, Patty entered Mia's vision. Not knowing what to make of Mia's gaze, she simply stared back.

"Um, milady?"

Hearing Anne's voice once again brought a smile to Mia's lips. "It's nothing, Anne. Thank you for helping me change. I really am blessed..."

Mia once again realized the true value of having loyal vassals she could completely trust. *I really was born in the right generation after all!*

While Mia had been pondering her life in terms of galloping horses, the race continued. The letter had been passed to the second horse, and it was neck-and-neck.

"Hm... I suppose the fact that they each need to run different distances is what makes this race so interesting," Mia muttered to herself.

"Indeed. I lack knowledge in the realm of riding, however..." Ludwig's glasses glinted as he adjusted them on his nose. "Their pace must be decided considering both the length they must ride and the current state of the race. Properly judging the circumstances is the key to this race, according to Gorka. For

instance, one could ride behind his opponent until the closing stages of the race to utilize his windbreak. Or, should too much distance be put between them, they could increase their speed in the opening stages and shorten that distance... There are countless possible strategies."

"Oho! I see... Judging the current circumstances truly is important." Mia once again realized the importance of sizing up your current situation when riding. Thus, it was key to ride a horse that could do it for you!

"But it's not just the skill of the horse, is it? Being able to communicate those circumstances to your horse is important as well."

You had to let the horse know where you two currently stood so they could use that information to make judgments. And who were "they" in this instance? The horse, of course! Still, even if you left the calculations to your steed, you still needed to be able to easily explain to them the information they needed to run those calculations.

"This race requires understanding between man and horse...how thought-provoking. This really is an interesting race," said Mia with a smile.

Mia's mutterings, in Ludwig's ears, sounded like this: "The rider must understand his horse's skills to properly judge the situation and set a pace. The ability to let your horse know of your intentions is also quite important in this interesting race."

Her Highness is truly erudite in matters of horses. Gorka was the one who invented this race, and I am sure he would be proud to hear such praise from one such as her.

Ludwig then and there resolved to later let Gorka know of Mia's words.

Chapter 11: Tragic Guilt

Having separated from Mia, Citrina took Bel and the other children up to the audience chamber. Seeing them, the emperor put on an incredibly...*kind*...grin. Manzana also looked at Bel—or rather, Patty—with a curious gaze.

"Indeed... She truly does resemble the previous empress. And the girl beside her looks quite a bit like Her Highness."

"Ha ha! Don't they? Though they are not quite as cute as my Mia..." the emperor said with a chuckle. He gestured at them to take their seats, and they did just that. Yanna, especially, was stiff with nerves and clearly seemed to feel out of place. While she had greeted the emperor before, sitting beside an emperor and a high noble was bound to come with some anxiety.

On the other hand, Kiryl had remained standing, leaning his upper body over the fence in order to get a better view of the race. "Wow..." Watching the competition from up high left a new impression on him. "Tearmoon is amazing! These horses are amazing!" Watching the passionate race had Kiryl letting out cries of joy.

Bel watched him with a smirk. "Oho, Kiryl! Let me tell you something good. There's a whole country called the Equestrian Kingdom where everyone rides horses!"

"The Equestrian Kingdom?" Kiryl looked to her with a tilted head as Bel proudly continued onward.

"Yup. It's a super amazing country! It's got big fields as far as the eye can see, filled with horses. The people there live together with them. Oho! I rode quite a few myself. Such good memories..." Bel tilted her head, narrowing her gaze as if she were looking at the sights of the Equestrian Kingdom far off in the distance. "I feel like I can still see it now. Oh, look! Over there!"

"Bel...I think the Equestrian Kingdom is actually over there..." pointed out Citrina, trying to be polite. Bel looked toward the direction she gestured to as if nothing had happened at all.

"...How I miss those days!" Bel lived by her own rules like

always. Despite Bel's questionable advice and teachings, Kiryl's eyes sparkled with wonder.

"I wanna go there too someday! Right, Yanna?"

Seeing how gleeful her younger brother was, Yanna's expression softened as she patted him on the head. "Yeah. Maybe we could live there someday."

Despite those being her own words, they sounded odd to Yanna. *Just a bit ago, I'd never have been able to think like that.* Her days of suffering in Ganudos Port Country flashed through her mind. They had been days of stealing food, fighting for scraps with poor children like herself, and living with the stings of wounds...and yet, they had done all they could to live. It had all been to protect her brother, so they could survive together. But now... *I can think about what I wanna do, or where I wanna live...*

"Yanna?"

She came back to herself to find Kiryl giving her a worried look. To put him at ease, she patted his head once again and looked toward Patty. She, as always, was expressionless as she watched the race. But to Yanna, she looked as if she were feeling...guilty.

Right. Patty's brother is...

Having been reminded of this, Yanna, too, began to feel guilty for enjoying these days—it was the same guilt that Patty now felt, the guilt of living through fun days without a care in the world.

I don't know why, but she can't see her brother, and he's somewhere not very happy...

Despite this, she was enjoying happy days. That fact sunk in like thorns in her heart.

The words of the girl she owed her life to flashed through her mind: "I want you to be a good friend to Patty." Right now, could she call herself Patty's friend? She pondered this for a long time before opening her mouth. "Hey, Patty. Why don't you bring your brother with us?"

"...Huh?" Patty didn't know what to think.

"If you came with us to the Equestrian Kingdom, I think it'd be really fun! Kiryl would be happy, and um...I don't know a lot about you, or your brother, but...I'm sure that Miss Mia would fix things."

Yanna wanted to say that Mia would save them, to give her a small sense of hope. If you asked Mia for help, she would. No matter how much despair you now felt, tomorrow—or the day after—happiness would one day come.

“So…when it’s all over, come with us and…”

She used up all her courage to say those words, and yet, they didn’t reach Patty.

Patty silently shook her head. “I can’t…do that. I’m sorry.”

What she returned were words of rejection. Yanna couldn’t ask the reason for them, for she seemed to be about to break down into tears at any moment.

Someone had watched over this scene. Unaware to all, Citrina had secretly been observing them, and she had correctly surmised what lay in Patty’s heart—it was a shadow of her previous self.

“Like Rina thought, she’s…”

Chapter 12: His Majesty Notices *Something*…

Vanos, former vice-captain of Dion's squad, was known as a man skilled at caring for others. He was the bridge between Captain Dion, who had strength that could rival a war god's, and his soldiers who, while elite, had strength that stayed within the bounds of mere men. Vanos's reputation was that of a man who carried out these duties well.

However, Mia was ignorant of his strength as a soldier; she was even worried that his skills wouldn't prove fit for a captain. But what he exhibited in the competition was enough to wipe those fears away.

"My! How wonderful!" The impressive form he exhibited in the first part of the modern pentathlon—archery—had Mia shouting with joy.

The modern pentathlon was a combined competition of archery, swordsmanship, horseback archery, horseback swordsmanship, and horsemanship. It was based on the training that soldiers completed, and they were also a collection of Vanos's fortes. The back of his large frame stuck up straight to the sky, just like a tree sprouting from the ground. It was reliability incarnate.

This dashing figure let out three arrows. They each hit the bull's-eye with a *whoosh!* that reverberated with perfect rhythm. While his skills may have paled in comparison to those of the Lulu Tribe, they rivaled those of professional bowmen.

His opponent probably thought the same. It sent him into a panicked rush that scattered his arrows. While his first two shots had been fine, his third landed slightly off mark. Still, he must have regained his composure, for after a deep breath, he let off one more arrow. It sped through the air and landed right on the target's center.

The Redmoons' men truly are impressive. He's so calm… Mia made her admiration occasionally known with satisfied hums.

Next was horseback archery. As soon as Vanos had floated his large frame atop his beloved steed, the horse sped off. They galloped beside the targets as Vanos fired three arrows.

"Oooooh!" His skills were enough to have Mia letting out a cheer. "Moons! How did he manage to hit the targets like that? He had to be in control of the horse the whole time..."

As Mia praised him, Ruby stood by her side the whole time with a puffed out chest that screamed, "See? *Seeee*?" She seemed awfully proud.

"That's right. You and Tiona also were able to fire arrows from horseback one time, weren't you, Anne?"

"Yes, however, that was because I controlled the horse, and Miss Tiona the bow," replied Anne with a dismissive wave of her hand.

Mia gave her a kind smile. "Oho ho! But you really saved me back then. There's no need to be so humble! You're a maid after all! There's no need for you to participate in such battles!"

"But as vice-captain, I should learn those skills for myself..." Ruby's worry was written all over her face, a complete one-eighty from her previous proud expression. Looking quite anxious, she muttered, "Could I actually do that myself?"

"Well, I'm sure it would be best if you could, but...I doubt you'd ever be fighting on the front lines."

"Ha ha! I, though, am capable of such." Completely unable to read the room, Aima haughtily stuck her neck into the conversation. Dion, of course, was nowhere to be seen. Aima's arrogance was directly proportional to her distance from him.

As these noble ladies chatted, the competition continued. Duke Redmoon's man proved victorious in the horsemanship section, and Vanos claimed victory in swordsmanship. The only thing left was that same battle on horseback.

"His opponent is quite strong, but he's nothing compared to Vanos. Oho! Vanos is the captain of my Princess Guard, after all!" she said with a satisfied smile. Then, she glanced over to find that Aima, who had seemed to be enjoying herself just moments earlier, was now pale.

"My, Aima! Is something the matter?" Mia followed her line of sight to find not Dion, but Vanos. "You're not afraid of Vanos, are you, Aima? There's nothing scary about him. Compared to Dion, he's just an average man with a kind temperament."

“No, I am not afraid. However…you see? He could take that in…a single hand. Dion Alaia could pick up such an aberrantly large man with a single hand. How frightening…” she said with a shiver.

Mia took a moment to consider this and…nodded. “I see. Now that you mention it…”

It should be noted that no one ever said that Dion could manage to take Vanos into one of his arms, but…well, at the same time, that statement couldn’t be proven false either.

“Moons! We can’t have that, Aima! Imagining horrific scenes like that could interfere with your race!” Mia patted Aima on the shoulder. “It will be fine. If Dion, um…looks like he wants to cut down your wolves or other companions, I’ll do everything I can to stop him!”

“Are you not afraid of Dion Alaia, Princess Mia?”

Mia put on the most composed expression she could muster. “Of course not! Well, that would be a lie, but…at the very least, I’m sure that if I stopped him, he wouldn’t cut me down. Probably not. I don’t think so.”

There were words that served as a bastion to Mia’s heart. *He considers me to be “delightful.” He wouldn’t cut me down so easily! Now, he’d slay anyone* un-*delightful at the slightest chance, but not someone delightful!*

Mia showed Aima a smile. “You’re almost up! But before that, let’s watch Vanos’s valorous performance to get you excited! Today’s a day of fun horse riding, after all!”

“I see… Yes, you’re right…” Having cheered up, Aima responded with a nod.

Thus, the two spent their time cheering Vanos on.

Somewhere else in the audience stands, another set of noble ladies were losing themselves in the competition.

“Wooow! Oh my gosh! How amazing! The captain of Miss Mia’s Princess Guard is so cool!” exclaimed Bel as she jumped in excitement. Kiryl copied her, hopping about and cackling himself, and while Patty’s expression remained the same, her eyes were locked on the race.

However, someone was silently watching them. Tearmoon’s emperor, Matthias Luna Tearmoon, first looked at Bel whose eyes twinkled with wonder, then at Patty whose eyes were locked on the race. Finally, he looked at Mia, who was cheering from below.

“I see...” He gave a silent nod. Then, he muttered, “Muscles, is it? Requesting that he train me is certainly... Hmph.”

That very moment, as Mia was cheering, a shudder of unknown origins made its way down her back. She would never realize what had caused it.

Chapter 13: The Main Race Begins at Last

Hm, I do wonder what that chill was…

Mia looked around, her eyes landing on the audience seats. There, she found Emperor Matthias and Duke Manzana Redmoon happily chatting away. First…he bent his elbow and flexed his bicep, then pointed at it, and then pointed at Vanos. They were probably just praising Vanos's muscular build and strength as a soldier.

That should have been desirable for Mia…emphasis on *should have*. But for some reason, Mia was left with a sensation of dread.

No, I must be overthinking things.

The competition concluded with Vanos's overwhelming victory. He demonstrated unparalleled strength in the horseback swordsmanship section, completely dominating the representative from Duke Redmoon's forces and beautifully demonstrating his worth as captain of the Princess Guard.

"I didn't know Vanos was so strong. I normally don't make misjudgments like that…"

Ruby laughed. "That was no misjudgment, Miss Mia." She flared her nostrils with a haughty puff of air. "Such a feat was easy for Captain Vanos! He could have equally claimed victory with one hand."

Mia couldn't help but think it had to be impossible to control both a horse and swing a sword with a single hand, but she knew saying that aloud would be uncouth. She would never do something as tasteless as rain on the parade of a girl in love.

Mia grinned. "I'm quite comforted to know that. Well, at the very least, I think we've sold Vanos to Duke Redmoon as much as we needed to," she said with a satisfied nod. "As long as Hildebrandt takes the bait, my plan will have gone perfectly! I'm counting on you, Aima!"

Mia looked toward the grounds, and with perfect timing, Aima

and Hildebrandt stepped onto the field. The lustrous moonhares they rode cast a spell over the audience.

"My, that's..."

"Duke Redmoon's precious Skyred Hare... What a wonderful coat he has."

"Yes, but the horse Her Highness's friend is riding is also magnificent. Look at its hind legs. They're gorgeous..."

The soldiers in both encampments couldn't help but gulp at the sight. It led Mia to make the following conclusion. *I see. So, it's not just the Equestrian Kingdom. There are many horse lovers here in Tearmoon as well. And I had thought Gorka was in the minority...* Yes, she had finally realized the horse mania that lay dormant in her kingdom. *Hm... I wonder if there would be any interest if we started researching horses at Saint Mia Academy. There might even be nobles who volunteer their assistance...*

Running a school took money, and while Tearmoon's economic stability was on the rise, they were still a bit strapped for cash. Yet there were still some nobles who squandered that money.

If they're going to spend it anyway, I might as well have them spend it on Saint Mia Academy! And it would be even better if they gave their money willingly. Hm...

This was *horses*, after all. Researching them had all sorts of uses. It could even be used in the markets.

While I'm sure those in the Equestrian Kingdom wouldn't be fans of selling horses, we could research how to heal horses quicker or make alcohol and other treats from horse milk. And I'm sure they'd be interested if we researched how to raise better horses. In that case, we may even be able to export that knowledge...

Mia nodded with a smirk. "This really could be an excellent idea. It would strengthen our cavalry, and making shipments requires horses too! Most of all, it's horses that carry you away when you need to make a run for it... Yes, researching horses is a great idea!"

"Your Highness? Is something the matter?" Ludwig looked at her curiously, but Mia dismissed him with a shake of her head.

"No, it's nothing. Could you remind me of how many laps this race will be?"

"Only one. We believed it would be the best reflection of a moonhare's speed."

"I see. So, it truly is nothing but a simple race."

It really was befitting a race of moonhares. Mia had managed to win the Matching of Steeds in the Equestrian Kingdom because it was a long-distance test of stamina. Had she faced off against the Mountain Clan's precious Loklou in a true competition of speed, she would have surely lost.

Dongfeng is a wonderful horse, but everyone has strengths and weaknesses…

A sprint like this would best show a moonhare's true worth. To show off the horses they were so proud of, Aima and Hildebrandt walked them side by side in front of the audience stands first and then the encampments of both teams. As they belonged to neither team, they were treated as guest competitors. Thus, the soldiers of both teams were able to support them without any ties of obligation.

When the two approached Mia, she called out. "Good luck, Aima! And don't work too hard, Hildebrandt!"

She sent out heartfelt encouragement to Aima and a cheer that was "encouragement" in name only to Hildebrandt. The two answered her with smiles and waves of their hands.

Judging from her expression, I can see Aima is ready to give this her all! That's reassuring to see.

The time she spent trembling in fear of Dion was now long in the past. Seeing her focus, Mia couldn't help but feel some relief. However, there was something she had yet to notice: the seeds of danger had already been sown. It wasn't until shortly after the race had already begun that Mia had started to sense the omen hidden within Aima's performance.

Chapter 14: Mia Grandly Misjudges Aima's Riding Skills!

The two horses took to the starting line. While some horses would get worked up knowing a race was about to begin, Skyred Hare and Keilai both remained calm. However, different airs surrounded them.

Skyred Hare had the aura of an upright nobleman. His demeanor was an act meant for the audience, a way of showing off the dignity of being a horse of noble stature.

On the other hand, Keilai was simply quiet and focused on the course before him. He had the face of a warrior ready for battle, perhaps expected for a moonhare prided by the Fire Clan. Watching them, Mia felt like this was the difference between a horse who had seen the battlefield and one who hadn't.

While I'm quite certain Keilai is more used to racing under a variety of circumstances, Skyred Hare is incredibly speedy if he can gallop properly.

As far as Mia could tell, the grounds were even, and there was nothing that could cause any accident that could rattle Skyred Hare. In other words, this really was a simple battle of speed.

I won against him through strategy, but...that will be difficult under these circumstances. I wonder what Aima is planning.

While Mia knew she didn't have anything to worry about, she couldn't help feeling a bit anxious.

Also, for the sake of clarity, Kuolan was the one who had come up with "Mia's" strategy, not her. The horse ran, and the horse thought. All Mia had to do was empty her mind and focus on making it as easy as possible for the horse to gallop. *That* was the ideal division of labor between horse and rider...or was it?

As tensions rose, the judge raised his flag. Then, he swung it down and loudly announced, "Start!"

On signal, the two horses dashed forward. Aima and Keilai took the lead! They accelerated, distancing themselves from Skyred Hare

who did his best to keep to their tail. However, the distance between them only widened, and by the time they had turned the first corner, Keilai and Aima were a full two horse lengths ahead. Skyred Hare...had been completely left in the dust!

"Woo-hoo! You're amazing, Aima!" Mia shouted with joy, and the rest of the audience let out loud cheers alongside her.

Oho ho! This is the most the audience has been invested so far! I'm sure it will be enough to satisfy Duke Redmoon.

Mia couldn't be happier, but soon, her smile froze on her face. Keilai was getting faster.

"Woo! Do your best out there, Aima!" shouted Mia.

Keilai grew faster and faster, so fast he seemed to be soaring through the air.

"Keilai really is quite fast..." she let out an impressed mutter.

Keilai accelerated. He was as fast as the wind!

It was then that Mia suddenly began to think, *Wait! Isn't he going* too *fast?!*

By then, the danger Mia had noticed wasn't just keeping proper pace. Aima was an Equestri, a skilled rider capable of representing her whole clan. She would never be so disgraceful as to leave her horse out of breath during the second half of the race.

There was also no sign that Keilai would *ever* run out of breath. He was full of life, gleefully galloping and clearly enjoying himself. Actually, Hildebrandt and Skyred Hare seemed to be having a much tougher time of it doing all they could to try to keep up.

Aima and Keilai's performance was just *that* breathtaking. Their strength was overwhelming, but above all else, they were simply beautiful. They exhibited a grace that could only belong to those who had truly mastered an art, just like Dion Alaia's sword arm could leave people in awe, or like the bow and arrow of the Lulu's most skilled warriors could leave its viewers with bated breath. Before the two, the audience knew they were watching something truly special. They couldn't look away.

Oh. This is bad.

Mia had made a mistake. She had assumed Aima's skills matched Xiaolei's. All she had been expecting was a performance good enough to easily win against Hildebrandt and bewitch him into heading for the Equestrian Kingdom.

B-But this...this is too much! They're far too strong!

By the time they rounded the second corner, the competitors

were now three horse lengths apart. For a moment, Mia had wondered if Hildebrandt's plan was to pick up speed at the end and chase victory, but his expression made it very clear that wasn't the case. He was focused on the race but gave orders to Skyred Hare in a panic. Meanwhile, Aima hadn't given any orders to Keilai at all. Instead, she completely offered herself up to Keilai...or rather, it was more like their hearts were fully connected as they galloped through the race not as man and horse, but as a single unit.

It was a performance so stellar it completely outshined all the previous competitors. Though Vanos had inspired incredible interest, by now, it had already been forgotten.

Mia looked to the audience and found Manzana. From what Mia could tell...he was completely glued to Aima's performance! His mouth was agape as he watched their stunning moves. Vanos's impressive accomplishments must have already been thrown over the event horizon of his memories.

On a side note, the emperor had folded his arms and appeared to be examining the state of his muscles. At least *someone* still remembered Vanos.

No, my father doesn't matter! We can't have Duke Redmoon forgetting the impression Vanos made on him. Ugh! I completely misjudged all this! Before such a captivating performance, Vanos's efforts had been lost.

Her riding skills are beyond compare to Xialoei's. Even I *may not be able to hold my own against her...* Mia gulped. Naturally, she was sure that she was a better rider than Xialoei. Yes, Mia had bested her in the Matching of Steeds. In that sense, her riding skills could be considered superior to Xialoei's. But still, something wasn't quite right about that statement. How odd. Well, anyways...

Well, I'm glad this will be enough to mesmerize Hildebrandt, but...this is over-the-top! She's going to mesmerize more than just him at this rate!

Until just moments before, the grounds had been bustling with energy. But now, all was silent as the audience held their breath, enchanted by the beautiful horsemanship on display before them. This was a true exhibit of horsemanship skills, not so different (or actually, *very* different) from that displayed by Tearmoon's Pegasus Princess.

Agh! She has them all hooked! I didn't know Aima was such a succubus...

Mia gritted her teeth as Aima and Keilai rounded the third corner. Now, there were four horse lengths between her and Hildebrandt. He whipped Skyred Hare as much and as hard as he could, but Skyred Hare failed to accelerate. On the other hand, Aima and Keilai got only more into rhythm. Their supple footwork had the audience in a frenzy.

That was when Mia suddenly remembered something. *H-Huh? Don't* I *have to follow this competition? Am I going to have all* this *behind me when I take the stage?*

Now, she panicked. However, another blow to Mia's plans would soon be showing its face.

Chapter 15: Mia's Mistake —A Horse Dance of Life or Death—

The race concluded with no upsets.

He couldn't manage a comeback or any gains in the second half.

Despite Mia's thoughts, it was doubtful that anyone actually expected such a thing, much less any who viewed it as a possibility. Hildebrandt's defeat had been that gargantuan.

After reaching the goal, Aima came before the audience. She alighted from her horse, bowing to Duke Redmoon before approaching Mia.

"Ha ha! How was that, Princess Mia? Did the empire learn of the strength of us Equestris?" she asked, looking as proud as can be.

Mia showed her a cheerful smile. "You were wonderful, Aima. You really are the Fire Clan's best rider," she said, clapping at Aima's performance.

All the while, she was thinking, *If that were the case, couldn't you have just gone a bit easier on him?* Despite wanting to say those words aloud, she kept them to herself. For those of the Equestrian Kingdom, a race between steeds was sacred. It was unlikely she'd even consider not doing her best. *Well, it would be wrong to complain to Aima. I should give her my heartfelt praise. I'm sure Hildebrandt enjoyed their race and has already taken interest in the Equestrian Kingdom.*

Mia couldn't ask for too much. She needed to focus on her original plan, that of ruining talks of Hildebrandt and Ruby's engagement.

With perfect timing, Hildebrandt approached. Mia was certain he had come to praise Aima's performance and for them to discuss their competition. Or maybe, he had come to ask that Aima show him Keilai up close. In any case, Mia was pleased to see they had captured his interest.

Hildebrandt was now beside them. He looked straight at Aima with a smile. "My, Lady Aima. Your performance was simply

stunning. It has left me humbled."

"I see. If Keilai, my comrade, has demonstrated his strength, then I am pleased."

"Oh? A horse as your comrade...so this is how the riders of the Equestrian Kingdom think. I must learn to do the same if I wish to be as excellent a rider as yourself."

"Yes. Should you treat horses as replaceable tools, you shall never see their true strength. On a battlefield, your horse is the one you can trust above all else." Aima folded her arms and gave a haughty nod. Hildebrandt's eyes seemed to be practically glittering listening to her.

This seems to be going well. Now, I just need to get Duke Redmoon to remember Vanos's performance... Mia began to ponder this dilemma, but quickly, it became no time for that. Hildebrandt had suddenly taken a knee.

"Huh?" It left Mia completely dumbfounded.

Hildebrandt looked up to Aima, his voice quiet. "Lady Aima, I wish that you teach me your skills. Would you become my master?"

Hearing those words, Mia regained her composure. *O-Oh. I see. Hildebrandt is simple, so it makes sense he would make such a request.*

Hildebrandt was a man who, after encountering some tasty sweets, would declare that he would grow up to be those sweets. He was a simple man.

Rather, this was all going to plan. He had asked that Aima directly serve as his teacher, but that was just that. If they could lure him with some half-baked suggestion that before Aima could teach him, he first needed to study the basics in the Equestrian Kingdom, they could still get him out of Tearmoon.

Even more perfect would be if he fell for an Equestri girl while he was there. He would never be Aima's lover, but the Equestrian Kingdom was teeming with girls who knew how to ride a horse. As long as he fell in love with just one of them, his engagement to Ruby would be done away with.

Well, I suppose he could marry Aima. It would be fun to become her relative, and I'd like to have connections with the Equestrian Kingdom... Oho ho! I do wonder if Hildebrandt could ever capture her heart, though.

In any case, that would come after they had gotten to know each other. With thoughts like that, Mia had completely let her guard down. She had forgotten who Hildebrandt truly was.

Still on his knee, Hildebrandt took Aima's hands in his. "No, that's not right. I must stop beating around the bush. Would you become my life partner?"

"*Huh?!*" screamed Aima. Just kidding! It had actually been Mia.

This sudden turn of events left Mia whirling. She blinked her eyes, and then turned her gaze to the audience—specifically, the man who was sitting beside her father, one of Tearmoon's Four Dukes, Manzana Etoile Redmoon.

Manzana's usual expression was that of a relaxed grin, but now, he gritted his teeth furiously as the blood vessels poked out from his forehead. Words such as, "Reluctantly—*unwillingly,* I might add—I offered you my dear daughter, and yet this is how you treat me, you bastard?!" were hardly befitting a duke, but to Mia, those were the exact words written on his face.

While he did pretend to be a gentleman, Duke Redmoon was a military man at heart. Otherwise, he wouldn't have created such an elite personal army.

H-How in the moons could this happen? Mia couldn't help but groan. This was all because Aima's performance had been too impressive. Had she not ridden so magnificently, Hildebrandt wouldn't have been so bewitched and he wouldn't have made this sudden proposal. Had she not ridden so magnificently, Manzana would have remembered Vanos as an impressive soldier, a memory that could have served as a stepping stone making him a candidate for Ruby's partner. This was all the fault of Aima's stunning performance!

"Ugh, there's nothing that can be done now. We'll just have to move on to the next performance and hope it can get us out of this..."

Basically, the next performance just had to be better than Aima's. If they could get the audience invested, they could change the dominating atmosphere and get Duke Redmoon to calm down. But just as this hope came out of Mia's mouth, she also realized this: "Wait, the next performance is my Horse Dance!"

Thus began the Horse Dance of life or death.

Chapter 16: Pegasus Princess Mia Makes Her Debut!

In any case, she had to hurry. This situation was intense.

Mia ran her way toward Dongfeng when she heard a voice. “Your Highness...” It was Ludwig.

“We’ll head right into the Horse Dance! Please set up the hurdles.” After giving those short commands, Mia turned to examine the Princess Guard and Duke Redmoon’s men. Seeing the uproar that had consumed them, Mia couldn’t help but groan. “Th-This is terrible! Agh! Stupid Hildebrandt! He needs to learn how to read a room...”

In his younger days, he’d been a man who wished to become tasty sweets. It seemed that time had only made him more of a simpleton.

“He’s too true to his own desires! If Ruby just had his recklessness, then...then?” Suddenly, Mia recalled how Ruby had tried to confess her feelings completely out of the blue. “Her choosing the absolute worst time to confess really proves that blind courage can cause all sorts of harm and not any good at all!”

Dongfeng had been waiting for her, and when Mia finally came into view, he let out a whinny. Despite the dire circumstances, he seemed completely relaxed. He looked around the arena in a daze. Terretortues were the prided horses of the Tearmoon Empire, and they could stay calm in any situation.

“My, Dongfeng. How reliable. You’ve got quite the guts,” said Mia as she petted his neck. She then looked toward Gorka, who was standing beside him. “Is everything ready?”

From what she could tell, Dongfeng had already been equipped with reins and stirrups. All that was left was to hop on his back.

“Yes, whenever you are ready,” said Gorka with a deep nod. “Those two horses were wonderful moonhares, but our Dongfeng is just as impressive. Please show the audience what he has, Your Highness.”

Mia nodded at this inspiring message before gallantly (*...gallantly?*) hopping onto Dongfeng's back with the brave warrior cry of "Huptydoo!"

"Well, in all honesty, I don't think I'll be able to amend this situation, but...we simply must provide at least a bit of a distraction. I trust you, Dongfeng." She petted his neck once more. "Hi-ho, Silver—uh, Dongfeng!"

With the name of an unknown horse on her tongue, the pair was off! However, the obstacles had yet to be placed on the course. Preparations were moving expediently under Ludwig's command, but still, they had yet to be completed.

Still, Mia already knew as much. The current task at hand was providing a distraction that could change the atmosphere. She slowly trotted a lap around the arena to attract the audience's gazes, raising a hand in the air to wave as she went. For one, had her event just started, there was a good chance nobody would be watching. It would be pointless! And more importantly, it would just be a bit sad.

Though doing something like this is quite pointless anyway, I suppose. Aima had just displayed a perfect performance, and Hildebrandt had just displayed an insane proposal. *Is anyone here actually interested in my Horse Dance?*

Just as this worry began to take over her heart, there was a cheer from the audience. "Woo-hoo! Go, Mia!"

It left Mia shocked. She looked up to find none other than Matthias Luna Tearmoon, who at some point had stood up from his seat. He was currently waving both hands in the air like a maniac. Among the crowd was a single man who had been looking forward to nothing but Mia's performance, as if Aima had never taken to the course, and next to this man was Abel, Bel, Citrina, and the children letting out cheers of their own.

Oho! Father can be quite annoying at times, but at times like this, I'm thankful he's around.

Despite his current rash enthusiasm, he was the head of this country. If the emperor was interested, the soldiers below couldn't just ignore who he was cheering on.

There was also something Mia was forgetting: who *she* was. If it wasn't mentioned with annoying frequency, it was easy to forget, but Mia was this nation's imperial princess. Yes, she was a *princess*! And among the princesses that filled Tearmoon's long pages of

history, very few had a passion for horsemanship. Of course, knowing that for sure would require scouring through every page, but at least among those who came to mind, Mia was the only one.

Plus, her horsemanship skills weren't half bad, as surprising as that may be. They surpassed those of the average noblewoman hobbyist, and even among those in Saint-Noel Academy, Mia was one of the most skilled.

Yes, even if Pegasus Princess was a more than slight exaggeration, somewhere down the line, Mia had gained the skills befitting of the title of Pony Princess. To be clear, that is *Pony Princess* and not *Porky Princess*, as easy as it may be to confuse the two.

While Mia was making her rounds, the course had been set up. The obstacles were positioned exactly as she had practiced.

"Excellent work, Ludwig... Then let's be off. Shall we, Dongfeng?"

Dongfeng responded with a high-pitched whinny.

And so did the wind, which howled in response.

Chapter 17: Princess Mia Is a Talented Dancer!

First, a large inhale. Then, a full-force exhale. After that, Mia gave Dongfeng his orders.

"We need to put on a show, Dongfeng! We won't lose to Aima and Keilai!"

Dongfeng responded with a neigh. Then, as soon as Mia had squeezed the reins, he dashed off.

There was no need to be in such a rush. Mia offered herself entirely to the comfortable waltz Dongfeng created and looked toward the audience.

It seems like we were able to attract their attention. Still…

The most salient issue was what came after—whether or not they could properly complete the performance. Failing halfway through with all these eyes on her would just be embarrassing. But the greatest thing pushing her forward was the knowledge that she couldn't make a fool out of herself in front of Abel.

First, she made her way to the hurdles right in front of the encampment of Duke Redmoon's men. There were two of them, and she would jump them in succession.

Dongfeng changed the pace of his feet. Now, he had beautifully shifted from a waltz to common time. Mia used her arms and knees to match his rhythm. From on top of the horse, the obstacles appeared quite tall. However, Mia remained unshaken.

If I let myself get afraid, Dongfeng will get scared too… Not to mention, these hurdles are made to fall easily to prevent the horse from getting injured.

The hurdles were light enough that Mia herself could lift them, and they were terribly fragile to boot. Even if Mia hit her head on one, she'd be fine. Thus, she focused on nothing but Dongfeng's movements.

Focus. Focus. *I'm not the one who's jumping, after all! I need to make sure I don't get in Dongfeng's way.*

Mia shook her body to match Dongfeng's pace. The image she embodied was the aurelia as it danced in the waves! She was able to match Dongfeng's movements quite naturally.

With the hurdles now before her, she planted her feet in the stirrups and leaned forward. As soon as her backside began to float over Dongfeng, he jumped into the air.

Mia matched her center of gravity to Dongfeng's as they landed. She cushioned the impact using her hips and elbows before they headed right into the next jump. For a moment, they were in the air. Unexpectedly, their jump had been textbook-perfect, as surprising as that may be.

Recently, Mia's horsemanship skills had reached quite a high level. There was nothing phony about the Pony Princess! In fact, she had already superseded the skills of a Pony Princess, becoming a Super Pony Princess (and no, that isn't the Super Porky Princess, just to clarify).

With the second jump now cleared, Mia made a truly unexpected move. Mia—yes, the very Mia who perfectly embodied the jellyfish method of horse riding—had given her *own* instructions!

"Dongfeng, do a spin!"

It was the making of a new epoch. While Mia completely left everything to the horse during riding, dancing was a different matter. It was the only thing Mia was good at, after all. Mia knew exactly how to care for her partner in a dance as well as how to captivate her audience.

In order to show off her beloved steed to Duke Redmoon's forces, she spun before dashing right in front of them as she headed for the Princess Guard. As she approached, the stadium thundered with roaring cheers. She had a lot of fans in the Princess Guard.

"Dongfeng, now!"

Dongfeng twitched his ears. Mia grabbed the reins and steadied herself. On that signal, Dongfeng brought his front legs into the air with a low whinny.

"Woo-hoo!"

Cheers rang through the crowd. Mia raised her hand into the air.

“Giddyap, Dongfeng!”

On Mia’s command, he accelerated. With the obstacle now before him, he jumped high into the air. Then, just when he landed, he jumped once more!

Mia braced herself with her arms and hips and succeeded in maintaining perfect posture. This was a dance, after all. She couldn’t be sloppy. There were things even Mia paid careful attention to, as innumerous as they may be.

After landing, Dongfeng once again spun around as Mia waved at the crowd.

“Woo-hoo!” Another cheer reverberated in the air, and hearing it, Mia realized she had been mistaken earlier; she had no need to create waves that would wash Aima away.

That’s it! I just need to ride the wave Aima created and get through this event!

Thanks to Aima, the crowd was now easy to rile up. This was the opposite of a tough crowd, and whipping them into a frenzy was a piece of cake.

“We’re on to the final, Dongfeng! Let’s make sure we draw Duke Redmoon’s attention!”

Mia turned his head to face the obstacles set up before the audience chambers. Just as they had done before, they galloped straight over. Pushing at Mia’s back was the wind, and now, it was blowing harder than ever.

Chapter 18: A Formal Knight

"This is the climax now, Dongfeng!"

Dongfeng once again responded with a whinny. He accelerated straight for the obstacles. They had increased in number, and this time, they would need to jump over three. However, Mia wasn't afraid.

"Woo-hoo! Do your best out there, Mia!" shouted her father. It was a tad embarrassing, but...Mia decided to ignore it.

Doing three jumps in a row as the finale is perfect for firing up the crowd. I don't know if this was Ludwig's idea or Gorka's, but I'll get the crowd howling! Plus, I'll...I'll put on a good performance and provide a good distraction somehow!

With that in her mind, Mia easily made her way over the first jump. She landed gracefully and headed on for the second one. Dongfeng hopped into the air while Mia matched her breathing and center of gravity to his. She was certain they would prove successful.

"On to the last one, now!"

The second jump was smooth, just like a flowing stream...or just like the aurelia it was carrying away. They were on to the final jump.

Now, if I can just get over this jump, I'll...

Just like that, Mia began to think about the future. She had let her guard down, and it was fatal. Just as Dongfeng made his way into the third jump, a strong gust of wind made its way through the stadium.

"Waaaah!"

Dongfeng floated into the air as if carried by wind just like the mythical Winged Horse. This sudden change had caused Mia to lose her balance for a moment, but with a "Hwahumph!" quite unbefitting of a princess, she stood her ground, grabbing the reins and planting her feet in the stirrups. Then, she floated in the air longer than she ever had, finishing the show with a jump that outshone the rest.

Who would've thought I'd be able to show off a magnificent jump like this right at the end! Oho ho! I'm amazing!

Despite her inward boastings, this was nothing but a moment of carelessness. It left her convinced that the voice that rang out through the arena was a cheer of joy. Having stuck a beautiful landing, she raised her hand to the crowd with a smile that filled her face.

"Your Highness! Watch out!"

She saw Ruby rushing toward her from behind, followed by Vanos.

My? What could it be?

Mia leisurely turned around to find that one of the hurdles had been lifted by the wind. It was flying straight toward her face.

"Miss Mia! This way!"

Ruby reached for Dongfeng's reins, but it was no use. She wouldn't be able to make it in time. The obstacle was wide, and now, it wouldn't attack just Mia, but Ruby too. Mia let out a bloodcurdling scream as Ruby froze in her tracks.

"Watch out, you two!"

But then, someone gallantly lunged between them and the obstacle—Vanos. He had stepped forward in an instant and braced his large body against the incoming projectile that hurdled toward them, bravely rushing into it with his shoulders.

"Captain Vanos!" screamed Ruby. At the same time, there was a "*Snap!*" that resounded in the air. It was the horrifying sound of something breaking. Mia closed her eyes, but then she saw the obstacle flying toward them. She let out a scream.

Thankfully, the obstacle was split in two and passed right by them.

Huh? How did it get split in half?

"You hurt, Your Highness?"

Mia fearfully turned around to find Vanos jogging toward her.

"V-Vanos? No, I'm fine, b-but are you all right? You ran right into that hurdle..."

"Huh? Ha ha! That was nothing compared to dealing with Captain Dion," he said with a belly laugh.

It had Ruby collapsing to the ground. "A-Ah... Th-Thank goodness..." First, her words were a mutter. But then, she yelled, "D-Don't be so reckless!" as her voice trembled.

"No, I mean, this is nothing..." Vanos scratched his head with a

scowl. But then, the situation only grew more complicated.

"How marvelous! I, Emperor Matthias Luna Tearmoon, have witnessed your deeds!" A voice boomed from the audience stand. Mia looked up to find her father at the front of the box looking down on them. His eyes welled with tears. "How bravely have you defended my daughter, Mia. The work you have done is truly befitting your reputation as the princess's shield!"

His voice was full of emotion as he made that declaration. Then, he took on the tone of a mighty ruler. “Right here and right now, I shall bestow upon you a reward for your services. With the power invested in me, I, Emperor Matthias, bestow upon you the noble title of Knight Grand Cross.”

“Huh?” This development was so sudden that it left Mia reeling, and the same could be said for everyone. Vanos, of course, was standing there with his mouth agape, but the nearby imperial guards and Ruby had their mouths open in shock just the same. The first to recover among them was—surprisingly—Mia! She had been a victim of her father’s reckless whims in not just one timeline, but two. She had gotten used to it.

Now with regained composure, Mia quickly analyzed her current situation. “Knight Grand Cross...” she muttered with a nod. “Knight Grand Cross” was a noble title that had no fiefdom. The title could not be inherited, and while they were allowed a portion of the rights reserved to nobles, in reality, it was a title of honor alone. They could simply call themselves nobles and be recognized as such by the other Tearmoon nobles.

That was the whole extent of the title, and thus, giving into this selfish whim of the emperor posed no real problems. However, this event would leave a lasting impact. In all honesty, the hurdles were made to be light and fragile to avoid injuring the horse. It wasn’t like they looked all that threatening either, but no matter the truth, the display Vanos made of hurtling himself into that flying object to protect a helpless Mia and Ruby was meaningful; it was strongly persuasive.

“Is that man not the captain of Princess Mia’s Princess Guard? Isn’t it strange for him not to have a noble title?” That much was also true. While Mia was currently just a princess, by the time Ludwig and the others’ efforts landed her the title of empress, it could pose problems for the captain of her Empress Guard to be a commoner.

While it was a title of prestige alone, Vanos being a noble would have its advantages. Had Mia been making all these complicated analyses? Of course not! The only thing on Mia’s mind was this: *A common soldier gaining the title of Knight Grand Cross and marrying an Etoiline? What a dramatic twist!*

Yup, Mia's brain was fueled by romance novels, and just as her pink brain cells willed it, she gave a solemn nod and declared "I see! How wonderful," with a satisfied grin.

Chapter 19: Wind Dodged but Hit Head-On

“Milady!” Among the uproar, Anne rushed toward the group.

“My, Anne! Oho ho! How was it? My Horse Dance, that is.” Mia hopped off Dongfeng with a grin.

“That can wait for later. Are you hurt?” Anne examined Mia. The worry was clear on her face.

“Nope. I’m as fine as can be.”

“I see… Thank goodness. Oh! I brought you this.” Anne presented her with a thermos filled with moondrop lemon tea.

“Thank you.” Mia brought the contents to her lips immediately, sighing as the flavor spread over her tongue. The acidity of the fruit blended with the aroma of the tea to make a truly pleasant combination. What wet her throat was neither too hot nor too cold. “Oho ho! Thank you, Anne. This is delicious,” said Mia with a smile.

Anne returned her smile, but then, she was silent for a moment. “I…I’m truly glad you are safe. By the way, milady, this may be quite the odd question, but…was that gust of wind on purpose?”

“Huh…? On purpose?” Mia gave her a confused look, but Anne continued as if she didn’t notice.

“You didn’t summon that gust of wind, did you? Or did you predict that the wind would blow at just that moment?”

“Wh-Why do you ask?” Mia was flustered.

“Those in the Equestrian Kingdom say that you can control the heavens, milady.”

“Ah, I see.” While thinking, *That sounds like just the thing people might say about me!* Mia shrugged. “I don’t have that sort of power. That gust of wind caught me completely by surprise.”

She denied the allegations. Anne’s younger sister, after all, was Elise—the very Elise who would write *The Princess Chronicles*. Just imagining what sort of story she’d spin up if she heard of such talk had Mia shuddering.

“Really...?”

“Of course! I have no such power,” she once again declared.

Anne brought a hand to her chest, seemingly relieved. “I...see. Thank goodness.”

“Hm? Why are you so relieved?”

Anne’s expression turned serious. “Had that been on purpose, I’d have had to scold you for doing something so dangerous and causing me so much worry!”

“My, Anne. You’d be quite the reckless fool to admonish someone with the power to control the wind!” joked Mia, but Anne simply shook her head.

“Even if you did have the magic to control the heavens, I know you wouldn’t misuse it. What I’m afraid of is that you’d use it and get yourself hurt! That’s why I’ll never hesitate to admonish you, milady.”

“Anne...” Mia was moved to see such unwavering faith from her loyal vassal.

“Mia!” After Anne came Abel, his face red as if he had been running.

“My, Abel! What has you in such a rush?”

“It’s just...” Abel glanced at Mia, and the sight of her face immediately left him with a relieved grin. “I was worried you were hurt. I stepped out for a bit to check on you.”

“You too?” Mia giggled before giving him a spin. “Look! I’m perfectly all right. Vanos protected me, after all.”

“I see... Looking at you, you do seem to be fine, but...” Abel sighed. “How pathetic of me. When it comes to you, I just can’t keep my cool,” he said with a self-deprecating laugh.

“My, Abel!” Abel had grown up a bit, but just thinking that he had worried for her so earnestly left Mia’s cheeks feeling warm. Her throat dried up, making it hard for her to speak. She was just the average girl in love.

As if waiting for their conversation to conclude, Ludwig approached. He had been in charge of running this competition, and he spoke quite seriously. “My deepest apologies, Your Highness. I would like you to give some closing remarks. However...”

“Oh yes, that’s right.” Mia looked at the sky. “The wind is growing stronger. We better hurry and end this event.”

Mia glanced toward the audience stand and began to wonder, *Has Duke Redmoon's anger boiled over?* No matter how hard she looked, she couldn't make him out. But just moments earlier, he had been furious enough to leave his face red. Mia knew his anger wasn't directed at her, but she was still a bit afraid to be next to him.

"Hm... Why don't I give my closing remarks on horseback? It would be perfect given the competitions held today." Just then, a light bulb went off in Mia's head. *Oh, that's it! To put Duke Redmoon back in a good mood, I'll give my remarks on a moonhare!*

It had been unavoidable given their opponents, but his dear moonhare had been beaten to a pulp earlier. It was probably best if she took some steps to amend that situation.

I bet Skyred Hare is a bit disappointed he lost to Keilai as well. I'll give him a chance to regain his honor.

"On horseback...? Is that to prove that you weren't injured during the earlier accident?"

"Huh? Oh, well...I suppose there's that too."

Anne and Abel had run to her with worry. There were probably others who feared for her safety as well. Mia crossed her arms with a nod, but that was when Ludwig suddenly lowered his head.

"My deepest apologies, Your Highness. I was the one who made those obstacles. It is my responsibility."

"Hm? It's not like you to try to shoulder all the blame yourself, Ludwig." Mia tried to cheer Ludwig up with a kind smile. "No one is at fault for this."

Mia made sure to make this clear. Should Ludwig be overly critical of himself over this, it could negatively affect all sorts of things. She absolutely needed Ludwig to do his work with vigor and focus.

"No one could have predicted such a sudden gust of wind...not even myself." Mia was meticulous with her words, and thus, she added this statement. While it was doubtful Ludwig would believe such a thing, Anne had believed Mia was capable of such a feat. It'd be bad if Ludwig started believing things like that too. If that gust of wind had been summoned by Mia or even just predicted by her, in the worst case, it would mean Mia had set Ludwig up to fail. She needed to deny that possibility.

"Even you couldn't predict this...?"

"Of course not." Despite those words, Ludwig was still scowling.

Mia needed to work harder on him. “Us humans have no way of knowing when the wind will blow, dwoo...” She had been trying to add, “Do we?” but instead, she bit her tongue. Her earlier conversation with Abel had made her nervous and left her mouth dry, and now, it was coming back to bite her. She had failed to drink enough of Anne’s lemon tea!

Had she continued with on, it would have probably come out as, “Dwoo way?” and Mia had no intention of letting others see her in such an embarrassing state. At the same time, Ludwig still needed some more words of encouragement! She quickly changed courses...except she didn’t. She took a moment to breathe before adding “we?” at the end. Thankfully, she had avoided biting her tongue this time, but...

Agh! How stupid to be messing up my words right at the most important moment! With a bit of a wince, she looked at Ludwig hoping she had been able to cover herself. He was silent as he mulled over her words, but finally, he nodded as if he had reached an understanding.

“I... I understand the heart behind your words well,” he said with a bow. Relieved that she had cheered him up, Mia headed toward the moonhares.

“Us humans have no way of knowing when the wind will blow, dwoo...we?” Those words had sent a shiver down his spine. Usually, “Do we?” would have been spoken like a statement, but instead, her pause meant that she had spoken it like a genuine interrogative. It left the question open, instead suggesting that humans may actually *have* a way of knowing.

Yes, this time, Mia would not blame Ludwig. She knew he had no way of predicting that gust of wind. But by asking, “Do we?” she also was asking, “Is it truly all right to stay as we are now?”

Indeed... The recent crop failures have also been caused by cold winds. I had been ignorant, convinced that us humans have no way of knowing the weather of tomorrow. However...

Hadn’t Mia shown them the future? She had told them of the years of cold summers and famine that would accompany it. That was why they had been able to prepare.

As long as Mia is here, things will be fine. But once she passes, we must ensure that the future citizens of Tearmoon do not become victims to famines and the whims of the heavens... Is that not what she’s saying?

When will the wind blow? What will the weather be like

tomorrow? While they cannot completely be predicted, can't we infinitely polish our ability to do so?

But how can that be done? Ludwig crossed his arms and began to ponder that question.

While it may be an aside, in the following few years, two new faculties were established at Saint Mia Academy. One was General Horse Studies, the same imagined by Mia during the tournament. And the other? They researched the weather. Each of these faculties contributed vastly to the Mianet's Shipment Division and the Agricultural Technology Development Division, but that was a story for another time.

Chapter 20: Dealing with the Aftermath

After saying goodbye to Ludwig, Mia hurried to where Skyred Hare was hitched. There, she found Ruby.

“Oh, perfect timing! Could I have a moment, Ruby?”

“Miss Mia... Is something wrong?” Ruby gave her a curious look, but Mia quickly segued into her request.

“I was actually hoping to borrow Skyred Hare.”

“Skyred Hare?”

“Yes. I need to give my closing remarks, so I was thinking I’d do so while riding Skyred Hare around the arena, but...” Suddenly, Mia noticed something odd. The Skyred Hare currently standing next to Ruby seemed to have lost his vigor. “My, he doesn’t seem to be doing very well.”

“No. He was excited to regain the honor he lost after his defeat at Saint-Noel Academy, but...”

Skyred Hare puffed out a lugubrious sigh.

“My, but it’s nothing that should weigh so much on your mind! You’re an excellent horse, Skyred Hare.”

Despite Mia’s encouragement, Skyred Hare simply hung his head in disappointment. But then...

“Indeed. You may not amount to the skills of Keilai and me, but you are still a praiseworthy steed. Had I ridden you and Hildebrandt Keilai, the results may have differed.” Mia turned toward that lively voice to find Aima approaching. Once she had come to Skyred Hare’s side, she gave him a soft spanking and said, “Yup. You are sturdy. I would like to ride you. You are a fine steed.”

Skyred Hare responded with a whinny that made it clear he had cheered up. He was pleased to hear praise from a true *mare*-stro like Aima of the Equestrian Kingdom. He was quite the self-interested horse.

“By the way, Aima. What happened with Hildebrandt?”

“Oh. Him... It was the first time I received such a proposal, so I needed some time to answer. However...” Aima put on a prideful look. “I am the acting chief of the Fire Clan and one of its warriors. It is only natural that my mate exceeds me in horsemanship skills and has strength that rivals my brother’s. Thus, I told him he must train before making his proposal once more.” She puffed out her chest.

Mia tilted her head. “Hm... A man more skilled than you at riding and as talented with a sword as your brother would mean a man like Dion. Are you okay with that?” asked Mia as she touched a hand to her cheek with worry.

“Huh?!” Aima was now the one tilting her head.

“No, well, I suppose *you* are more skilled at riding, Aima, but there aren’t many who could match your brother’s swordsmanship. You’d be matched with a fighting fiend like Dion. Is that the kind of man you like?”

That question had the blood rushing from Aima’s face. “I-I suppose a good sword arm is not...so...important? Yes, horsemanship! No man can be my partner unless he exceeds my skills with a horse! Yup!” clarified Aima in a panic.

Mia didn’t think there was such a guy out there, but she decided to ignore it. In any case, Hildebrandt would have to go to the Equestrian Kingdom to train if he wanted Aima’s attention, and that was good enough for Mia.

That should solve that problem. Next... Mia looked up to the audience stand and drew in a deep breath.

Mia appearing once again on horseback whipped the crowd into a frenzy. However, that was just the atmosphere Mia needed. *There’s no waves to ride in a lull! The best time to catch one is when the sea is slightly stormy.*

Yes, the air around them now was stormy, but not too stormy, and what was keeping that at bay was the horse Mia now rode, Skyred Hare. While he had lagged behind in the race, the dignity he exuded remained. Plus, Mia’s decision to ride one of Duke Redmoon’s horses demonstrated to both parties that their relationship was still amicable.

Mia walked down a line equally between the Princess Guard, Duke Redmoon’s forces, and the seat of the emperor. Her voice boomed. “So, how was today’s horsemanship tournament? I do

hope it proved to be a joyful event that helped relieve you of your daily frustrations." Mia looked to each encampment in turn. "While I do not believe it needs to be said, the competition today was between fellow soldiers of the Tearmoon Empire. You tested your strength against one another as comrades. Thus, I hope that you can give each other the praise you deserve for a job well done."

With that, Mia began to applaud. Some followed her, and nervous claps rang out from areas of the crowd. Once she heard the noise, she continued. "Oho! That's the natural reaction we should all have. This was a competition, and thus, there were both winners and losers. It is hard to completely rid oneself of such bad blood. However, I would also like to say this: We must taste the bitterness of today...today!" Mia kept the "and not tomorrow" part silent. "We shall savor the joy and bitterness of today, enjoy a delicious meal, down some wine, sleep, and wake up tomorrow with a clean slate!"

In other words, the events of today held no room for grudges. And if possible, she wanted that to go for the mess Hildebrandt made too. That was her declaration! "With the competition now behind us, I am sure you all have mixed emotions. However, that shall lead to no feelings of ill will between us! We are all fellow neighbors of this continent, and you are all my beloved subjects."

With those words, Mia preemptively defended against any rifts that could form between the two sides. Both the Redmoons' private forces and the Princess Guard were precious military assets. If or when it came down to it, she wanted them to join hands and protect her together. Thus, at today's party, everyone was equal and there were no grudges. She declared to all that they would have a good meal and just forget!

Oddly enough, Mia's words did reach the hearts of the soldiers on both sides. Until just moments before, they'd passionately cheered their comrades on, sometimes meeting frustration and even sometimes feeling hatred for their opponents. But suddenly, all that was left was memories of a day joyfully spent.

In a nutshell, that had been brought about by the odd order of events. There had been battles of brute force and then a race between moonhares so magnificent it left all completely enraptured. Then, still riding the high of the previous race, they viewed Mia's Horse Dance, an event with no winners or losers. As amusing as it was, the soldiers thought her Pony Princess Dance was wonderful.

They were left with the general feeling that could be summed up as: “A lot happened, but I sure did have fun.”

Somewhere down the line there were some accidents. Not only was Mia attacked by flying obstacles, but there was even a sudden proposal. But when looking back on it, it was all joy.

In the end, the two encampments approached each other on their own. They shook hands and praised each other’s performances. Then, with perfect timing, the beer barrels that Ludwig had prepared were brought in. Everyone was in good spirits.

After battling as if death were on the line, the two sides clinked their beer mugs in cheers. It was why the Mia Pick became known as a celebration of peace in the future.

The soldiers poured each other drinks and made their vow: “Let’s do this again.” Wishing to one day repeat this festival which had so boiled their blood, they promised each other to stay in good health until that day came.

Thus, once the grudges had been dismissed, Mia led her horse to Duke Redmoon. It was finally time to bring this to an end.

Chapter 21: A New Thing in an Old Way

Mia urged Skyred Hare forward. She headed for the audience stand. It was finally time to face Duke Redmoon.

"Did you enjoy the tournament today, Lord Redmoon?" Mia asked as she looked up to the stand.

"Ah, Your Highness. Yes, I suppose. That race between steeds left my heart racing and blood boiling. In that sense, you could say I enjoyed it." Duke Redmoon nodded with a scowl. Mia watched his expression and began to think.

I suppose he can't just forget everything that happened today. He did think Hildebrandt would marry his daughter. Watching him do something like that must be quite a shock. I bet father would have killed him with his bare hands if he had been in Duke Redmoon's shoes.

With that in mind, Manzana was a man of relative self-control. But if Mia didn't do something quick, her relationship with Duke Redmoon would be ruined, and that would be bad.

Mia knew she needed to tread carefully. She gave an exaggerated nod. "I am so glad you did. Well, there was that surprising proposal in the middle as well." Mia turned to Manzana. Seeing his cheek twitch was enough for her to want to run away. But unfortunately, she was stuck on top of Skyred Hare.

Feeling Mia squirm atop him, he looked to her with a glance that said, "What?" But he stood his ground as if to say that running wasn't befitting of a ruler. This horse really didn't know how to read a room.

"W-Well, they do say that young love is hard to defy," Mia added, now that her only option was to continue speaking. Luckily, she had already put together a plan.

First, she would push the line of forgetting all about today. All these happenings could just be put behind them. Nobody had to take responsibility. At least, that's how Mia hoped this conversation would conclude.

But if that didn't work, she planned to calm him by utilizing another line of thought.

"Being unable to resist one's passions of the heart is just the nature of those who are young." The key word here was "young."

Yes, Mia conspired to frame all of Hildebrandt's recklessness on his youth!

"Yet, it is also true that the unfettered passions of the young pave the way for this country's future." She had changed courses. Now, she attempted to convince Manzana that being young wasn't all bad.

She stared up at Manzana. At any hint of anger on his countenance, she was prepared to make an emergency retreat. However, she stood her ground and further approached her enemy! "Thus, I want to support the passions and love of my dear cousin Hildebrandt."

"What?!"

Mia ignored the shock on his face and continued. "His feelings may open new doors for the relationship between Tearmoon and the Equestrian Kingdom. Young passion has the power to resist all setbacks and pave new futures." After that declaration, she attacked! "And it's not only him. I shall support Ruby as well."

Here, she made it clear that she would back and support Ruby's love as well. Of course, she didn't go screaming, "Ruby is in love with Vanos!" Instead, she simply hinted at it, suggesting that Ruby had a love of her own. Plus...

What Hildebrandt did was...well, a fiasco, but Ruby wasn't excited about marrying him either! That's why Hildebrandt's actions actually helped both of them out! You're lucky your daughter won't hate you now!

She secretly made that declaration. She wanted to scream to the world that Hildebrandt's actions had actually been a *good* thing for Ruby.

"You want to support Ruby?"

"Her young passions are also precious. I don't think it's right for them to be smothered by old customs." Mia wanted to tell him to leave his ideas about what makes a fitting partner for a high noble behind and just support Ruby in her love. If Ruby's love for Vanos was too strong and resulted in her getting hitched to some lower noble, it would only have a negative effect on her.

"Ruby was the first to make it clear she supported me." Among

the daughters of the Four Dukes, Ruby's contributions had been grand. She was the one who had devised the plans to guard provision convoys using the Princess Guard, and the work they carried out had made a great impact. "Ruby also voiced her approval for the new thing I am trying to do."

"The new thing," or rather, the new alliance. The clandestine pact between her and the Etoilers could not be made public. But on that day, Ruby had made it clear she was her ally. Now, Mia needed to be hers.

Not to mention the marriage between a noble lady and an elite soldier who rose from a commoner to a noble is so romantic! I want to see it for myself! Mia was nothing if not true to her desires.

"Ruby has supported this new thing you are attempting through her actions?" Manzana pondered what Mia could be referring to. She was renowned as the Great Sage of the Empire. There must be meaning behind her words.

A marriage binding House Cotillard and House Redmoon was not to her liking. But why? She, of course, had made one of those reasons clear: the relationship between Tearmoon and the Equestrian Kingdom. *The young, huh?*

Hildebrandt Cotillard's passion for steeds could not be fulfilled in the Tearmoon Empire. Gifting him with a fine steed could not satiate his desires.

So, it is the Equestrian Kingdom where his young passions can be put to proper use and come to full fruition. That must be how Her Highness views it. She must find displeasure in seeing talents go unnurtured. That could be seen with the Princess Guard. The stableman and that giant of a captain carried out the duties assigned to them by Mia with vigor.

So this is the true power of the Great Sage! Having reached his conclusion, Manzana opened his eyes wide. Incidentally, his reasoning oddly resembled that of a certain belabored loyal vassal. Hopefully Manzana would not fall victim to any stomach pains.

But that is not all she wishes to say. I was mistaken in my ways. Her Highness wishes to create the "new," yet I tried to demonstrate my support for her with the ways of old. She is trying to tell me that my methods are not proper given her goals. Manzana let out a deep sigh. *I see now... Yes, binding two high nobles together through marriage to strengthen my ties to her and show my support is an antiquated method.*

I must have looked like a weathered gravestone in her eyes. On the other hand, what she aims to do is to rule Tearmoon as the empress, a feat none have done before. It is the newest of goals, and yet, I had tried to show my support through old methods—a true contradiction.

Thinking about it now, he realized the way he supported Ruby may have also been fettered by old thinking, as he had tried to support her advancements through the military ranks by marrying her to Hildebrandt, a noble and promising young man.

Ruby sought to cut her own path through her efforts in the Princess Guard in exactly the way Her Highness wishes of those in her faction, and yet I... In that case, what should he do to make his support clear? *I must consider that. Hah! I see my work is cut out for me. This must truly be what it means to support Princess Mia.*

Manzana couldn't help his self-deprecating laugh. "I understand. I see I rushed this marriage between us and the Cotillards. I shall discuss this more with Ruby."

"Yes, I think that's exactly what you should do," Mia said with a grin.

It was a few months later that Manzana caught word of the General Horse Studies faculty at Saint Mia Academy. Upon hearing of this *new* and fascinating branch of study, he immediately announced his support. Backed by the nobles of the Redmoon faction and the Ebony Moon Ministry, the faculty of General Horse Studies was off to a swinging start.

Chapter 22: No Chance to Win!

That night after supper, Ruby suddenly received a summons to her father's study. The manor of the Redmoons was built like an impenetrable fortress, and as she walked down its halls, she held her back straight. She looked so gallant and dignified that even the maids she passed let out sighs at the sight of her beauty. But once she stood before the door to her father's study, it was she who now sighed.

"Ugh, I do hope Miss Mia's plan went well," she muttered in defeat. "Give me strength, Captain Vanos." Her whisper revealed her to be a bonafide young maiden in love.

She gathered herself with a deep breath. "Excuse me. You called, father?" She cracked the door open and entered the room. Her father was relaxed in his chair.

"Ah, Ruby. You're here. I apologize for summoning you when you must be exhausted."

"It's no problem. But what is it?" Ruby went to sit down on the sofa where her father had gestured for her to take a seat.

"I have decided to break off talks of engagement between you and Hildebrandt Cotillard."

Those words had her frozen in midair. "You have?" She kept her outward composure, but on the inside, she was screaming, "Woo-hoo!"

Well, she was already half expecting this. After what Hildebrandt had declared in front of such a big crowd, it was hard to view him as a proper candidate for her husband.

Still, she quickly pivoted and held back her emotions. Her father was a talented strategist. Talks of her betrothal had been flung at her in a surprise attack that left no room for rebuttals. For Ruby, this, too, was sudden. He might throw something else at her before she could recover from the confusion.

After regaining her composure, she carried out what she first needed to do. "Father, about Hildebrandt... I ask that you don't punish him too harshly. I hope you arrange things so that our

relationship with the Cotillards will not be damaged."

"Hm?"

"I am sure he had no ill will. Love is hard to defy." She spoke her last words from experience. "Plus, hurting our relationship with Her Highness will have the opposite effect that you intended. Please, rein in your anger about this matter no matter how hard that might be."

"I know. Your engagement was not official. I intend to deal with this matter peacefully. However," Manzana silently looked at Ruby. "You don't look very disappointed, nor do you look angry... Was I right in thinking Hildebrandt Cotillard did not suit your tastes?"

"Hm? Oh, well. It wasn't that exactly, but..." Ruby waved her hands in front of her face in a panic. Mia's words suddenly flashed through her mind: "There is a time for everything."

Perhaps now is the time to let my father know of my feelings. If she told him now that she had someone in her heart, he may not bring up talks of her engagement in the future. It was a sudden thought, but wouldn't now be the right time to make the first move and limit her father's movements? Inside her mind was a mini Mia waving a referee fan and screaming, "Go, go, go!"

Ruby first breathed in, then out. Then, she took one more breath. She opened her mouth to speak.

"So you wish to test the limits of your power?"

Her father's unexpected comment caught her off guard. All she could croak out was, "Huh...?"

"No, there is no need to spell it out. You want to climb to the top of the command not through borrowing the power of House Redmoon from your fiancé, but on your own power alone. That is what you wish for, no?" Manzana seemed to be watching something not there as he continued. "I see that I overdid it in trying to come to your aid. I thought I knew of your talent and ambitions." He shook his head with a self-deprecating grin. "Youth, huh? I had completely forgotten. Just how far can you go on your own, is it?" he said with a chuckle.

"What? No, father. I..." Seeing her father had gotten the wrong idea, she rushed to correct him but was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Excuse me." The man who entered was a butler who had long served the Redmoons.

“My apologies, Miss Ruby. Someone from the Princess Guard is here to see you. It seems like there has been some sort of trouble,” he sounded hesitant to speak those words. Ruby was Duke Redmoon’s daughter, and for the daughter of one of the Four Dukes, there was arguably no need to answer any nighttime summons. However…

“My apologies, father. Let’s talk about this again some other time.” Ruby stood up without even a second of hesitation. She was the vice-captain of the Princess Guard. She had the important role of being Captain Vanos’s support. Even by mistake, she couldn’t betray his trust. She hurried to her room to prepare to leave, but all the while, she couldn’t shake the feeling that she had just missed her timing to tell her father how she truly felt.

No, well… Even if I told my father, it could be a disaster if I told Vanos how I feel and he turned me down. My father might get so angry he’d threaten Vanos, and I don’t want that to happen… Yup! This was the right call!

After all that thinking, Ruby had reached a conclusion. “Her Highness said that I couldn’t be reckless. I had almost forgotten! I’ll leave my father for later. First comes Captain Vanos.”

Thus, the lovesick princess of the crimson moon rushed to the Princess Guard’s barracks.

Chapter 23: By Order of Love General Mia, Charge!!!

"This is quite the windstorm..." The moment Ruby exited her manor, the strong gust of wind that blew her way had her grimacing. The gusts that had begun during the horsemanship tournament had only increased in fervor, and now, they howled. Hopefully, Mia would still be able to sleep at night.

"Let's hurry, Lady Ruby."

Ruby responded to Celes with a nod and hopped into the carriage. "What happened?"

Celes sat opposite her. She furrowed her brow. "Well...a few of the Princess Guard's horses have escaped."

"Huh?" Ruby was now scowling as well.

"The strong wind left a hole in the stables, and a few of our horses escaped. We have a few squads out looking for them, but..." It was already dark outside. The soldiers were having a much tougher time capturing the horses than they had imagined.

"Today really has been a day filled with horses..." said Ruby with a bitter grin.

Celes bowed her head with earnest shame. "My deepest apologies. I wouldn't normally bother you with this, Lady Ruby, but it was Captain Vanos who ordered that I summon you..."

"He did? Thank you!" Without thinking, Ruby clasped her hands over Celes's. Once she caught herself, she looked shocked for a moment before continuing. "W-Well, you know. I *am* the vice-captain, after all. My job is to aid Captain Vanos, so of course I would be summoned during an emergency." She now looked completely composed.

Eventually, their carriage arrived at the Princess Guard's barracks. It was bustling. After the tournament had concluded, they jumped right into a banquet. That's when news of the escaped horses had reached their ears. There were even some of Duke Redmoon's men inside the building.

Ruby hurried over to Vanos. “Um... What’s the current situation?”

“Ah, Vice-Captain! Sorry for summoning you so late at night, Miss Ruby. Duke Redmoon’s men have decided to give us a hand, and while I’m thankful to have the help, things are getting a bit out of hand...”

“Yes... Of course I can offer my aid.” Ruby cut off her words with a frown. He still called her by title, and to her, it felt like it put a wall between them. As vice-captain, she wanted him to speak more casually with her. Not to mention, he was now a Knight Grand Cross. He was a noble. There should be no need for such formality between them. Couldn’t they talk casually as equals? At least, that was Ruby’s hope. She gathered her courage, ready to say something. “Captain Vanos, His Majesty granted you with the noble title of Knight Grand Cross today. Please remember that fact.”

“Huh? Um, I mean—”

“I may be an Etoiline, but I hold no court rank myself. That means *you* now outrank *me*! There’s no need to treat me so formally!” Ruby had hit him with a formal version of “Cut it out, won’cha?!”

Vanos, on the other hand, seemed a bit uneasy. “I mean, all this Knight Grand Cross stuff is...”

“Does it displease you?”

“No, not that... It’s just, these guys really tore me a new one over it. I got to hear all about how jealous they’re gonna be of me when my noble title lands me a pretty noblewoman as a lover.”

Ruby’s heart skipped a beat. She wanted to know just how Vanos himself felt about the prospect of a romance with a noble. If he said he found it unthinkable, of course she’d find it depressing, but if he instead said he’d be happy to date one, her rivals would increase tenfold.

In Ruby’s eyes, Vanos was the most handsome man in the world. Of course that made her nervous.

“Hey! Our captain’s a noble now! Ain’t any of the other soldiers gonna think they’re better than us now!”

Vanos’s new title had whipped his men into a frenzy. Vanos watched on with a forced grin before inviting Ruby to his private study. “We wouldn’t’ve been able to hold a conversation back there. Oh, I should get you something to drink...” said Vanos as he offered Ruby a chair.

Ruby shifted in her seat. “U-Um, Captain Vanos? Wh-What do you think?”

“Huh? Think about what?” Vanos had no idea what she was trying to ask.

Ruby gathered all her courage. “U-Um, about a romance with a noblewoman?”

“Uh, I mean…I’ve never thought about it before. I’m not living in a fairy tale, after all. Oh, that’s right.” Vanos nodded as if he had just remembered something. “I heard from Sir Dion that those kinda stories have been popular lately. I suppose a commoner knight like me becoming Knight Grand Cross and having a romance with a noble lady would make for a good story, but…” He shrugged. “Well, talk like that’s got little to do with me anyways. Unless my looks improve, it’s not gonna happen, and unfortunately, I don’t think I’ve got the personality or stories that could draw the interest of you, Vice-Captain.”

“I…see.” Vanos’s response left Ruby half-relieved and half-disappointed. Her expression was conflicted.

“But, well, I never expected you to be one to badger me about love. Hopefully this doesn’t sound rude, but you’ve really grown up.”

“Huh?” All Ruby could do was blink. “What do you…?”

“Oh, I mean, I don’t mind if you’ve forgotten, but we actually met once a long time ago.” He wore the smile of those thinking fondly of days long gone. “To think the girl I met back then would grow up to be such a fine young lady, not to mention work with me as my vice-captain! Ha ha! Life really can be strange.”

It was then that Ruby realized he still remembered that—that he had remembered *her*. She was overjoyed, and that was why… *Wait? Isn’t this the right time to tell him?* She had a light bulb moment! The time to confess was *now*! This was the perfect flow into telling him that she’s been in love with him ever since!

Right, Miss Mia? She asked that question to the Mia of her heart, and when she did, she was met with a mini Love General Mia waving a baton and proclaiming, “All forces, charge!”

Ruby gave a slight nod. She first inhaled, then exhaled, and then… “Um, Captain Vanos?”

“Well then. I think it’s about time we hurry and go catch those horses. I can’t keep a young lady like you out and working too late.” Vanos sent her a sharp glance. “Vice-Captain, could you get me the

map?”

“...Yes, right away.” Pierced by his serious gaze, for a moment, she was hit with vertigo. In the next, she was rushing off to find a map of the capital as she whispered to herself, “Maybe things can stay as they are for just a while longer.”

Thus, Ruby’s love was yet one-sided, and even Love General Mia couldn’t know the conclusion their story would one day reach.

Chapter 24: Princess Mia's Elegant Morning

The morning after the horsemanship tournament, Mia overslept. She stretched in her bed and let out a loud yawn. "Hm, I don't think I've completely recovered from yesterday's exhaustion. I'm still so sleepy..." She let out another stifled yawn as she rubbed her eyes. "I suppose this is because my Horse Dance was so demanding..."

Now, this really should be clear without mention, but Mia had *not* been unable to sleep due to her fear of the howling wind. Her unrestful sleep was completely attributed to yesterday's exercise (probably).

"Good morning, milady." Anne offered Mia some hot milk. She took a sip and let out a sigh.

"Ah, hot milk really is the perfect thing to drink in the morning."

The mellow sweet scent, thick texture, rich flavor, and full-bodied milky taste stimulated Mia's brain cells, waking her. With an invigorated nod, she quickly changed into her dress and headed to the cafeteria pushed by her appetite.

"Oh! Good morning, Miss Mia!"

There, she found the children. The one who shot up from her seat to greet her was Yanna. Kiryl followed her example and rushed out the words, "Gwhood mwornhning!"

"Oho! There's no need to rush, Kiryl. You'll end up choking yourself. Please, relax and eat your food slowly."

Mia next turned to Patty, who hung her face which was as expressionless as usual. For some reason, she seemed worse off than she did yesterday.

"Um, Miss Mia?" Yanna suddenly approached and whispered into Mia's ear. "It seems like Patty feels guilty for leaving behind her brother and having so much fun by herself. I'm worried about her as...as a friend." As she croaked out the final few words, she was clearly embarrassed. Calling Patty a "friend" herself must have

made her feel self-conscious.

It warmed Mia's heart and she softly patted Yanna's head. "I see. Thank you for letting me know, Yanna." She then turned to Kiryl. "Did you have fun yesterday?"

"Yes! I had *tons* of fun!" he said with a full-faced grin.

Mia gave a satisfied nod. *So Patty's younger brother really does seem to be in some unfavorable circumstances. I do want to help, but he is in the past…and more importantly, I don't know Patty's situation either. There's nothing I can do about it now…*

The report on House Clausius, Patty's family, had yet to be completed. Both what kind of family they were and why they had been wiped out were questions Mia had absolutely no answers to. Thus, she was a sitting duck until Ludwig could finish his report, but… *Well, I suppose it's only been about ten days since I entrusted him with the task. It should take a bit longer until I can hear the details. Hm, now that things have ended nicely with Ruby, I wonder if there's anything else I can do.*

While Mia just wanted to laze around all summer, she toyed with the idea of reading some books to gather information or trying to pull intel out of her father as she did so. But something quickly upended that peace, and it came from an unexpected source.

"Th-Th-This is terrible, Grandmother Mia!" Just as Mia was relishing some soft, fluffy bread, her granddaughter Bel came dashing into the room.

"My, Bel… It's not proper to be running around like that. Plus, I'm *Miss* Mia, remember?" warned Mia with a scowl. Just as she was exasperated and thinking, *She really does need to remember that she's a princess of Tearmoon*, she chomped down on another bite of bread, opening her mouth as wide as she could manage. Now, only half the slice remained.

Mia did enjoy tearing the bread into small pieces and eating it that way too, but she absolutely loved stuffing her cheeks full of bread and munching down on it. She ate in a way that had one question if she really remembered that she was a princess of Tearmoon.

As Mia "elegantly" enjoyed her breakfast, Bel waved her arms in the air. "Th-This is no time for that, Miss Mia!"

Bel's dramatic facial expression had Mia as equally exasperated as before. She first rinsed down her bread with a sip of tea. "What is it? There can't be anything that could leave you so panicked so

early in the morning."

"S-Sapphias is going to stage a coup!" she said, Ludwig's diary in her hand. "He's going to lead the nobles of the Bluemoon faction against you in a rebellion! I-It says so right here!" She opened up the diary.

Meanwhile, all Mia could do was hang her head and mutter, "*Huh*?"

Chapter 25: Princess Mia Calls for an Emergency Meeting

S-S-Sapphias is going to stage a c-coup?!

Mia gulped down all the tea she had in front of her. Then, she let out an exaggerated deep breath in an attempt to calm down. First, she looked around the room. None seemed to be listening, but to make sure she was covered, she said, “Oh moons, Bel! You can’t say things like that even if you’re just talking about a novel set in Tearmoon! By ‘Sapphias,’ you mean the villain Sapphi, and by the ‘Bluemoon faction,’ you mean the fictitious Bullmoon faction, right?”

She made that statement so exaggerated that her intentions thankfully seemed to have been picked up on by Bel. “Yes. You’re right. I was just talking about a novel, Miss Mia,” she said with the worst acting one could imagine.

Relieved that they had been able to cover up this gaffe, Mia quickly leaped into action. “Then, Bel, I would like to hear about this in detail, so why don’t you come to my room? Oh, and you should bring Rina with you as well.” After giving Bel her orders, Mia turned to Anne. “My apologies, but could you bring Ludwig over as well?” Mia gathered the best lineup of personnel she could currently think up and groaned.

“Miss Mia?” Mia turned to the voice to find a worried Yanna and Kiryl.

Patty, on the other hand, curiously muttered. “Sapphias? The Bluemoon faction...?”

“All is well. We’ve simply been having a difficult time finding a plot for a new novel. Didn’t you visit Elise in the library the other day? I was hoping to have her write a new story, and we were just discussing what it should be about,” said Mia with a kind smile in an attempt to throw them off track. “There’s nothing for you to worry about. You should all go enjoy your summer vacations. You can ride horses or go ask Elise to tell you some stories. Oh, but you

should keep sweets to a minimum! If you don't listen to the chef, you'll never grow up to be big and strong."

Mia patted their heads as she once again began to think. *For now, I need to figure out the situation and work up some counterplan.* After quickly shoving the rest of her food into her mouth, Mia got up from her chair and mumbled through her food that she'd be taking her leave.

By the time Mia returned to her quarters, the members she had called were already assembled.

"I am sorry for summoning you all here so suddenly. However, we are facing an emergency." With that, Mia glanced at Bel.

Bel picked up on her cue and began to speak. "Right. You see, Sapphias is going to stage a coup." She didn't bother to sugarcoat her words.

Mia quickly added an explanation. "I have already told you that Bel came from the future. That is how we came into possession of this information. In the near future, it seems that Sapphias and the Bluemoon faction will attempt a coup. Right?" Mia sent Bel a glance, and she affirmed with a nod. "Hm... Well, for now, I suppose we need to question Sapphias. Though if this is true, I doubt he will be honest."

"Miss Mia..." Citrina wore the same sweet smile as always. "There are medicines that force people to tell the truth." Behind her smile was a devil!

"Oho..." Mia took a moment to consider this. *That sounds quite useful. We could use it in questioning, but it's also a double-edged sword. It might create a crack in my relationship with Sapphias that's beyond repair.*

If she doubted Sapphias and drugged him, the Serpents would be able to use it to their advantage. Mia turned to Citrina with a nod. "Thank you, Rina. But let us save that as a last resort."

Citrina nodded. She showed no hint of disappointment. "Yes, Rina agrees. The effects of that medicine last a whole week. If we use it, there's a chance our enemies will figure us out." Her smile, however, seemed a bit troubled.

Mia scowled. "Um, Rina? I do believe I've told you that from now on, you don't need to poison anyone."

"If a substance lacks the ability to kill, we Yellowmoons don't consider it poison." She said this so casually. But anyways...

“I don’t think Lord Sapphias could do such a thing.” Abel was the next to speak.

“Oh, that’s right. You met with Sapphias recently, didn’t you, Abel?”

“I did. Based on what we discussed, he didn’t seem to be planning anything like that at all. He and the young nobles of his faction were talking about how they wanted to cooperate with you in bringing Tearmoon to new heights. It’s hard to think that he’d betray you,” said Abel with a pained look on his face.

Ludwig followed with a nod. “I agree. I can see no merits for Lord Sapphias in betraying you now.” He pushed up his glasses. “My apologies, but is there any chance this information is faulty?”

“Hm...” Mia nodded with a groan. *Could this be false?* She looked at Bel.

“It’s unthinkable that Professor Ludwig would write down lies! And it’s even more unlikely he’d be mistaken about something!” she declared.

Mia agreed. Rather than the embellished and dramatized Princess Chronicles or the bloodstained diary of Mia’s personal experiences, Mia was certain that Ludwig’s dream journal was a much more trustworthy source.

“Bel? If I remember right, that diary isn’t just a journal of Ludwig’s experiences, but contains records of his dreams as well, right?”

Bel nodded. “Yes. That’s what he said.”

Dreams were memories of histories born from disturbances in time. Considering that Ludwig’s dream journal comprised even those, it was an excellent text for predicting what would come. The words describing the future in the Princess Chronicles or Mia’s diary easily changed. The written word was even more influenced by changes in history than physical matter or memories.

Thus, Ludwig wrote his diary so that the words changing due to disturbances in history wouldn’t be a problem. By including both dreams and real history, they could figure out the cause if entries about dreams became accounts of real events.

His writings were incredibly trustworthy and withstood history’s changes. However, the Ludwig of the future still worried about its validity. He viewed the effects of history’s changes with apprehension. This was because while Bel coming from the future to the past was even decided in their timeline, Ludwig himself had

no memories of her bringing his diary with her. That meant that the dream diary which so accurately predicted future events could be the source of new disturbances.

Those in the future who had succeeded in constructing a world that matched their ideals wouldn't want to change the past. And even if it did change, they would want to keep it to a minimum. So much was only natural.

"You couldn't decide whether you'd entrust this to me or not until the very end. But you believed in me and left me this journal on the condition that I would only show it to the others if it was absolutely necessary." Bel hugged the diary to her chest. "So, I can't show it to you now, but I promise it's something we can have faith in!" Bel was dignified in her declaration. They were majestic words befitting one who had inherited the genes of the Great Sage of the Empire.

...By the way, Bel had only realized the entry about Sapphias's coup because she spent much of her time reading the journal. She read it every day!

This was, of course, because she had been told there must have been a reason she had been flung into the past. In order to find a hint, she did her best to read through the diary as much as she could...just kidding! Bel was never so serious about her studies. At the same time, it was definitely not because she was trying to put herself under the diary's influence as a way to shirk her duties either.

"It seems, Professor Ludwig, like you thought that the less the diary changed, the less the past. That means that if I read the diary and find something that changed, my actions negatively influenced the past. So, that might mean it's best for me to do nothing at all!" was of course, a complicated line of thinking beyond Bel's capacity. Mia might have barely been able to reach that conclusion, but Bel wasn't as bent on skipping class and lazing about as Mia.

So, why did she spend her days so faithfully reading the diary? That answer was simple—it was pure curiosity. This was *the* Chancellor Ludwig's *diary*, after all. How could she not be interested?

As a pupil of adventure-ology, Bel was faithful to her curiosities.

Chapter 26: Their Weakness...

After hearing from Bel, Mia once again spoke. “No matter what the circumstances may be...Sapphias will betray us. Let’s operate under that assumption.”

The information Ludwig bequeathed them couldn’t be mistaken. That was a conclusion Mia had reached during the previous timeline. Once Mia had made that decision, Aima was the first to speak.

“That must mean...taking initiative is the foundation of strategy. Before our enemy can betray us, we must kill or capture him!” stated Aima with notable passion.

However, Mia didn’t quite agree with that plan. At her core, Mia was never a fan of violence. More importantly, well...Mia never had any faith in Aima’s skills in politics *or* strategy. Unless the topic was horses, Mia couldn’t really go along with a lot of what Aima said. Everyone had their strengths and weaknesses, after all.

Mia’s judgment was proven correct by the man behind the Great Sage of the Empire: Ludwig jumped right into it. “No, that cannot be to our advantage. If we were to punish someone who had yet to double-cross us, it would surely only be good for them. Oh, the Serpents, that is.” He groaned. “In the first place, should Lord Sapphias—a man who has already declared his support for Mia—cause her harm, it could lead to a revolt within his faction.”

“You’re right. I’m against it too. Lord Sapphias is serious about supporting Mia. I don’t think we should do anything that betrays his trust. And personally, I want to believe Lord Sapphias...as a friend,” agreed Abel. The serious expression he wore had Mia’s heart skipping a beat.

Ah... Abel is able to give his all for a friend! How truly wonderful! Shrill screams resounded in her heart. The daughter of the yellow moon was the next to speak, though almost assuredly, it was not in response to those screams.

“Rina still thinks it is important to make the first move.” She brought a hand to her cheek and tilted her head. “As soon as

Sapphias starts a revolt, no matter whether it goes in his favor, the Serpents will probably attack in order to drive a wedge between Miss Mia and the Bluemoon faction. No matter if he goes punished or unpunished, we will still be blamed. We figured out that Sapphias will stage a coup in advance, and so, Rina thinks it's important that we act while we still have that advantage."

Hm, if someone with firsthand knowledge of the Serpents is saying so, I'm sure it's true. That means...

Mia looked at Bel. "You mentioned that he'll stage a coup, but what exactly will happen?"

"Right, um... It seems like the plan is to attack your provisions' convoys to interrupt the flow of goods and ruin your reputation. It looks like it's very carefully planned."

"Carefully...planned? Hm..." Mia didn't think words like that quite suited Sapphias.

Well, that's right. I do think that he tried to operate behind the scenes during the student council election. Given that, making proper preparations and laying the groundwork behind the scenes *did* sound like Sapphias. But what should they do to prevent this outcome? Mia pondered this question...or at least, she pretended to. She was really just waiting for someone else to give their opinion.

"If this truly is carefully planned, then he did not act on a whim. He either prepared his plan in advance, or perhaps..." Ludwig scowled.

"It was someone else who created this plot, and Lord Sapphias simply agreed to follow." Abel was intent on defending Sapphias until the very end.

Mia nodded. "I believe Abel. After the pact we all formed, I don't think he would betray us. Of course, that goes for Rina, Ruby, and Esmeralda as well."

It was not just sentiment that drove Mia's thinking. Until now, there had been no future where Sapphias betrayed her. *Based on how much Bel is panicking, this must not have happened in the future she knows. That means some new cause led to this. I wonder what that could be...*

The bread and butter she'd had this morning was delicious, and thus, her brain was in pretty good shape. Mia groaned and scowled. The biggest difference between the present and the history Bel knew was Patty, but just how was she related? Mia thought. Then she thought some more. After a bit more thinking...she gave up!

“Well, in any case, we must act somehow. We don’t know why he will betray us, but we know his weakness, so I don’t think this will prove too big an issue.”

This earned her looks of surprise from everyone in the room. “What are you planning, Your Highness?” Ludwig spoke for all of them.

Mia responded with a smirk. “Why, of course I know his weakness well! Oho ho! Anne, could you prepare the things I’ll need to write a letter?”

“Yes. Right away, milady.”

Once Anne had prepared everything, Mia got right to writing. The letter was addressed to none other than the daughter of Marquess Schubert, Letizia—Sapphias’s fiancée.

Chapter 27: Keithwood Reaps the Seeds He Sowed

While Mia was having fun in the capital, Sion and Keithwood were spending their summer peacefully and quietly...in Rudolvon Outland County. They were there to visit Echard, who was diligently studying at Saint Mia Academy, as well as to pay their regards to the Greenmoons who looked after him. A quick trip to Perujin Agricultural Country also seemed like a good idea; Sion wanted to see the organization Mia was building for himself. In any case, Sion had all sorts of reasons.

I'm quite certain his main one, though, is to visit Lady Tiona. Keithwood couldn't help his glee. Sion's deepening relationship with Tiona had lifted some weight off the prince's shoulders. *As a prince of Sunkland, I do understand the need to be prudent with those in his company, but His Highness really does take it too seriously.*

Keithwood always wanted Sion to feel that he could act a bit more childishly, and while it was hard to consider it truly "childish," he warmly watched over Sion's awkward young love like an older brother. "Though I doubt he himself views this as love." Seeing the shrewd Sion act so incompetently when faced with his own budding feelings left Keithwood so amused he couldn't help but snicker.

"But truly, how peaceful..." whispered Keithwood as he watched the flowers wave with the wind in the courtyard of the Rudolvons' residence. He had been so busy as of late that he'd had no time to appreciate the blossoms, and thus, his gentle stroll spent gazing upon the flower boxes left him with a mysterious feeling. "Perhaps you could say I've not been busy enough..."

Of course, after a muttering like that, the god of fate couldn't just leave him alone.

"Oh, so this is where you were, Keithwood."

Keithwood turned toward the voice's source. It was one of the knights that had accompanied them from Sunkland to act as a

guard. “Did something happen?”

“Yes. I have a message for you, Sir Keithwood.”

“For me? Is it from Sunkland?” asked Keithwood with a scowl.

The knight shook his head. “No, it’s from Sapphias, son of Duke Bluemoon.”

“Ah, from Lord Sapphias.” Under some of the oddest of circumstances, Keithwood and Sapphias Etoile Bluemoon had forged a pact of friendship. Keithwood recalled the young man’s face with warm nostalgia. Before the summer, Keithwood had informed him via letter that he would be visiting Tearmoon. “I did wish to meet him should I get the chance… I wonder if he has made time for me.”

The Four Dukes held the highest noble rank in Tearmoon. If Sapphias had rearranged his undoubtedly busy schedule to accommodate Keithwood, he thought there was a need to apologize. But when Keithwood opened the letter Sapphias had sent, he froze. Its contents were simple: “It appears that Her Highness has invited Letizia to a cooking party.”

“Hwah?” Keithwood had let down his guard. What he managed to croak out had come out warped. He never expected to see those words lined up in that order, and out of either confusion or an even more indescribable emotion, the words themselves were warped from his shaking hands. He knew well how much Sapphias had suffered to write such a letter.

“How… How could things come to this?” No, what created these circumstances didn’t matter. He needed to decide on a course of action. “…Well, there’s only one thing I can do.”

He shrugged his shoulders. *I will pretend I didn’t see it. Yeah. There’s nothing I can do about this.* Sapphias Etoile Bluemoon was a friend, but he was also a member of foreign nobility. He was not someone Keithwood needed to offer his loyalty to, and currently he had the obligation to guard Sion. Plus he needed to see how Echard was doing and report back to the king. He had too much on his plate already! He wasn’t getting bored at all! He *promised*!

Letters fail to reach their intended recipients all the time. Yup, that’s entirely plausible. So, it shouldn’t be a problem if I claim I never read it!

Keithwood had resolved to let it slide, but something caught in his heart. “‘The need to rush to help your friends in danger,’ is it…?”

The friends of the Great Sage of the Empire Mia Luna Tearmoon

would have rushed to each other's aid without hesitation no matter who was asking. No matter the excuse, it was wrong for Keithwood to break this tradition. So why did he waver?

Words once spoken by Mia flashed through his mind: "We must reap the seeds we sow ourselves." If he abandoned Sapphias here, he might have to reap those seeds one day.

"That would be truly chilling," remarked Keithwood with a bitter smile. What should he do? Should he answer his dear friend's call for help? Why, there's only ever been one possible answer to that question!

Keithwood lifted his head with resolve.

"Keithwood, could I have a moment?" Sion appeared with perfect timing. "Hm? Is something the matter? You seem quite pained, even more so than when you faced off against those two wolves alone."

Sion peered at him with worry, so Keithwood rushed to answer. "Oh, no. It's nothing. Ha ha! Ha ha ha!" As Keithwood forcibly laughed, he began to think.

If His Highness accompanies me…in the worst-case scenario, there's the danger that he might have to consume some of Princess Mia's "food." Keithwood wanted to avoid that at all costs. *If I am to go to Lord Sapphias's aid, I have to time this carefully. Perhaps I could go while Prince Sion is meeting with Prince Echard.* Keithwood quickly and quietly began to put together his plan.

"Well, all is fine as long as there's nothing bothering you, but we need to change our plans. Mia has sent an invitation to Tiona."

"Huh?"

"It seems that she will be having a cooking party with Lord Sapphias's fiancée, Lady Schubert. She wants Tiona to aid her if possible, so why don't we also take the chance to accompany—What's wrong, Keithwood?"

Keithwood, quivering, had his face turned to the ground. Sion watched him curiously, unable to determine what he should make of Keithwood's reaction.

"Ah, n-no. It is nothing, milord." Keithwood lifted his face to reveal an expression…completely calm and clear. *All right! Now I can go without worry! Phew! Thank goodness! Damn it all!*

In this moment, Keithwood knew that Mia's axiom that people must reap the seeds they've sowed was true. The clarity and relief he currently felt were the seeds he had reaped. Had he pretended to

have never seen Sapphias's letter, he would currently be wallowing in regret, and it would certainly have gotten him mixed up in something unpleasant.

This was much better than the alternative. *Much* better. And yet, he couldn't help but feel that his relaxation and clarity was more akin to that felt by those who had just accepted their imminent deaths.

I really am so glad things turned out this well! Keithwood inwardly screamed those words in desperation.

Chapter 28: Mia Has an Idea!

We now turn back the clock. After the terror of Bel's declaration, Mia had accurately identified the crux of this matter. In other words...

"To control Sapphias, we must win over his fiancée, Letizia."

If—just if—Sapphias was planning a coup, weapons and words weren't necessary in stopping him. His fiancée telling him to stop was all they needed.

"This is the most peaceful way to resolve the situation." Mia had accurately determined her enemy's weakness. Recently, Mia's love-filled brain had been exhibiting feats truly befitting her epithet of Love General. "The question is just how to approach her..." Mia considered the contents of her letter with a groan. "I have little connection to Marquess Schubert. Where do I begin...?"

Mia crossed her arms and began to ponder. She leaned back into the seat of her chair, kicking her feet in the air as she began to gather her thoughts. Then, she munched, crunched, and snacked on the cookies before her as she began to think. That's when something quite recent occurred to her—the face Yanna had just made.

That's right. It slipped my mind, but I need to figure out how to deal with Patty as well.

Patty was still fettered by the shackles of the Serpents. If Mia couldn't figure out a way to free her heart, the present could waver. One wrong move and she could wake up in the dungeons with all her efforts being nothing but a dream.

No, I doubt it will be so serious, but...I suppose I can't deny the possibility.

Even if it was *Ludwig*'s idea, his time warp theory was nothing but a hypothesis. In that case, staying pessimistic and preparing for the worst was the basics of chickenhearted tactics. After all the hard work Mia had done to build the present, she wanted to protect it with everything she had.

"In which case, this should be enjoyable for Patty as well... We need her to think that this world is worth protecting. I need to

figure out something that Patty can enjoy free of guilt, but...the more fun the event, the easier it is to feel that guilt. This is difficult...” Mia groaned for a while, but then, she finally clapped her hands. “Aha, that’s it! Cooking!”

Her words were truly chilling.

“I’m fairly certain Patty enjoyed the sandwich-making at Saint-Noel’s, and if we make it a cooking class, it won’t just be enjoyable while we cook. She’d be able to make it again and have the same fun later! That could be an excuse for her!” The various elements scattered in Mia’s head gathered further into a single mass. “Most importantly, a cooking party is the only option for a date with Letizia! Oho! It was so much fun cooking with everyone before. I do think she said she’d like to try it again.”

It may be difficult to work out plans with the other noble ladies, but Mia didn’t see a need to hold this event with the Etoiline crowd.

“For now, I’ll invite Rina since she doesn’t seem busy, as well as the children...and some other suitable members too. I can keep this simple. All I need is to grow closer to Letizia. Then, I can explain to her that if Sapphias ever looks like he’s about to stage a coup, she needs to tell him to stop. This is perfect!”

Quite frighteningly, there was actually some sense in Mia’s cooking class idea. The only concern was whether the food would actually be edible.

“We have Anne, so there shouldn’t be any problems at all! Last time, we had Esmeralda who’s always fussy and Ruby who had a surprising lack of skill with us as well, but they won’t be here this time! And the children have all done this before at Saint-Noel Academy too! This will be a piece of cake!”

If Esmeralda had been in attendance, she would be bringing the reliable helper that was Nina along with her, but anyways...

“It’s decided then! Let’s have a cooking lesson!”

Mia’s letter quickly arrived at Marquess Schubert’s manor in Lunatear. That day, Dario Schubert was relaxing through his hobby of musical composition in the courtyard. Incidentally, after Sapphias graduated, Dario had enrolled as a student at Saint-Noel’s and had been spending his days quite busily. Perhaps to counter this, he had spent the whole summer lost in his hobbies.

“Well, I suppose it’s about time for lunch.”

Having come to a good stopping point, Dario was about to head inside the manor when he found an old maid rushing down the hallway.

"Huh? What's wrong, Gerta?"

"Ah, Young Master Dario..." The maid Dario had stopped was a veteran servant of House Schubert. She had once served another marquess family before coming to serve Dario's ten years ago. Gerta was usually the embodiment of grace, but she currently seemed bewildered. Dario couldn't help but have questions.

"Is something the matter?"

"Indeed. A messenger has just arrived from the imperial family. They have asked me to deliver this to Lady Letizia."

"To my sister? Huh." Dario took the letter. Its sender left him scowling. "It's from Princess Mia? To my sister...?" Alarm bells started to go off in Dario's head. *I think this is something I should report to Lord Sapphias.*

Thus, Sapphias would learn of Mia's plans, but as of yet, there were none who could know the consequences.

Chapter 29: Princess Mia Pries

Immediately after sending her letter to Letizia, Mia headed to speak to Patty and the others.

“A cooking party?” asked Patty with a curious glance.

Mia gave a deep nod. “Improving your cooking skills is deeply important. Food is the greatest pleasure that has been bestowed on us. A life spent unable to enjoy your daily meals is a boring one. At least, something like that is in the Holy Book. I think.” As Rafina wasn’t there, Mia felt comfortable spouting half-baked assumptions. “In any case, it’s a sad thing to lack the skills in the times you wish to cook someone a delicious meal. When you finally get the chance to cook for someone, it would be too late no matter how much you may wish it wasn’t. It’s important to act based on predictions of the future.”

Mia shook her finger and began a hubristic rant. “When I first cooked for Abel, even I was at a bit of a loss.”

...A bit?

“As a novice, I was unable to cook something that Abel could enjoy by myself. I needed the help of my friends.” Her phrasing opened the door for the interpretation that she was *still* a novice, which was incredibly hard to overlook. “Giving your whole heart in order to make someone else happy may be natural, but you also need the skills. Okay?”

Mia was trying to make it clear that it was fine for Patty to practice her cooking skills now so she could make something for her brother later. On the whole, that assertion was true. Yet given the pride she exhibited, it was hard not to get caught up in the validity of her arguments. Anyways...

“Um, Miss Mia? Can we come too?” asked Yanna with hesitation. Kiryl, on the other hand, seemed over the moon. He must have really enjoyed the cooking party they had held at Saint-Noel’s.

“It’s no problem at all. You two are also important members in our ranks,” she said with a smile. As the children wouldn’t go off on

their own and make the bread horse-shaped, it was a self-evident truth that they would be more helpful than a certain someone, as unflattering as that may be for that someone.

The next day after she filled the children in, she summoned Sapphias to the Whitemoon Palace. *I've already begun with a countermeasure, but I need to sound Sapphias out for myself too.*

Incidentally, according to Bel, the Bluemoons were dissolved after being forced to take responsibility for the attempted coup. Their whole faction met a sad end.

"But it really is strange. The Bluemoons are an important family that supports Grandmother Mia's reign..." Bel couldn't quite wrap her head around this change. Currently, there were many members of the central nobility who were against Mia's ascendance to empress. Ludwig and the others of the empress faction were relying on Sapphias as head of the Bluemoons to quell that dissent.

"Of course, I doubt there will be a coup. But should Lord Sapphias betray us, we must change our approach as well." The situation had even Ludwig in a constant scowl. Mia, on the other hand, seemed unbothered, and it was all due to the steps she was already taking.

If we can get Letizia on our side, we have nothing to worry about. With that absolute conviction, Mia waited for Sapphias's visit.

"Greetings, Your Highness." When Sapphias arrived, he was as he always was. He wore a friendly smile. There was nothing off about him at all... No! Mia's eyes were observant, and they spotted the slightest shadow over his expression. As he watched Mia, anxiety sometimes crept into his eyes.

Given his expression, he seems to be worried about something. It seems we can't be certain that there are no signs of future rebellion. Hmph...

Even in her wildest dreams, Mia never even imagined that her letter could be the source of his foreboding.

Mia flashed him a bright smile. "It's nice to see you, Sapphias. Come in. Why don't we have some tea in the hanging gardens today?"

She casually invited him to somewhere they would be alone. The hanging gardens that just jutted over the Whitemoon Palace's roof were off-limits to anyone but the imperial family, their attendants, and the few guests they invited there. It was the perfect place to dig into him.

Just in case, I've made sure we'll be alone except for Ludwig. My preparations are perfect. First, I need to hear what he has to say.

Their biggest concern was whether the entries in the diary could be trusted. If possible, Mia wanted to clarify this. Resolved and ready, the first thing that Mia said upon his arrival was thus: "First, let's please ourselves with some tea and cakes." She was the same Great Sage of the Empire as always.

Chapter 30: Pride and Irritation

Tea was brought for them. Mia lifted her cup to her lips and took a sip. The striking aroma of the carefully chosen tea leaves combined with the thick lushness of milk and the sweetness of a teaspoon of sugar stimulated Mia's taste buds.

"Hm..." Just as Mia was about to lower her eyes to determine what tea cakes had been prepared for the occasion, she was interrupted by a voice.

"Um, Your Highness? What was it you wished to discuss with me?" Sapphias timidly asked.

"Oh, my apologies. I lost myself in my thoughts for a moment." The matter of tea cakes had almost driven the topic at hand from her memory. She inwardly scolded herself as she munched on one of the sweets. Today's tea cakes were La Sunklanse pears cooked in honey. They left a sticky feeling on the tongue, and a bite was both soft yet refreshingly firm.

Oho! These honey-pickled pears are excellent! The chef really knows his stuff! Mia nodded away in satisfaction. Sapphias, on the other hand, was silent as he enjoyed his tea. When they had still been mere acquaintances, he would foolishly speak to her in this state. But now, he knew Mia well, and thus, he knew how dangerous it could be to talk to her while she was enjoying her food.

Once Mia had thoroughly munched down her tea cakes and absorbed their sugar content, she spoke to Sapphias as if nothing had happened at all. "By the way, Sapphias. I heard from Abel that you've been working quite hard for my sake. Something about gathering the young nobles in your faction?"

He laughed. "Well, what I'm doing now could be considered more just laying the groundwork. It appears that my father wishes for me to take the seat of emperor, and the powerful nobles around him appear to wish the same. To put a stop to it, I need allies." Sapphias bowed. "I plan to dedicate my all to the pact we formed."

"I'm counting on you," said Mia with a kind smile. She took a sip of her tea and used the opportunity to study him. *Nothing seems*

out of sorts for now. I tried asking about the Bluemoon faction, but I didn't catch any hint of anything shady.

As far as Mia knew, Sapphias wasn't good at hiding things. If you asked the right questions, he could never keep a poker face.

However, even if Sapphias has no intention of staging a coup, there's still the possibility that those around him will force him to do so. If he was as resolute as me it wouldn't be a problem, but he sometimes uncharacteristically lets himself get swept away. This analysis was made by none other than the number one follower of jellyfish tactics. *If Sapphias is to have an indomitable will that can withstand any circumstance, it seems like the help of his fiancée really is indispensable.*

Suddenly, Sapphias's expression grew cloudy. Mia had been watching him this whole time, and thus, his change in demeanor was immediately obvious. "My, is something the matter, Sapphias?"

"Well...yes. But..." He was clearly having some trouble getting the words out, but after a moment, he turned to Mia with resolve. "I've heard rumors that you will be having a cooking party with Letty...I mean, Lady Schubert. Is it true?"

Mia narrowed her eyes. *My, why does Sapphias know that?*

Of course, it had been brought to Sapphias's attention via Dario. Still, seeing that her plans had been preemptively inferred was enough to raise Mia's level of caution. "Yes, I am. I once gathered the other Etoilines for a cooking party, and we promised to do it again one day. Don't you remember?"

How could he forget? That was, at least, Mia's appeal.

"W-Well, yes, of course I remember, But, um, Your Highness, if possible, could you change it to a tea party...?"

"Huh? Why?" Mia once again looked at Sapphias with doubt. The bonds that could be forged during a tea party versus a cooking party where they all contributed to one result were on completely different levels. Cooking together would undoubtedly bring them closer, and thus, Sapphias's insistence on a different activity could only mean one thing... *Would Letizia and I growing closer be unfavorable for Sapphias?*

Mia's glare had Sapphias in a bit of a panic. "Um, well...as unfortunate as it may be, my Letty—no, my dear fiancée—has little skill in the way of cooking, as I'm sure you are already aware. You have gone through the trouble of preparing this event, and I simply worry that she will ruin it..."

“My, but there’s no reason to worry about that at all.” Mia laughed away Sapphias’s concerns. “Nobody is skilled at anything at the beginning. Even I still have a long way to go in terms of cooking skills.” Mia’s smile turned kind as she segued into her closing argument. “However, if you let being bad at something stop you, you will never get better. If she is truly unskilled in the kitchen, that is exactly the reason we should hold this cooking party. Don’t you agree?”

Mia spit out the soundest of sound arguments with a proud grin. It would surely have infuriated all who looked upon it.

Chapter 31: Mushrooms, the Hope of Tomorrow

The family of Sapphias's dear fiancée, the Schuberts, were a marquess house of history and tradition. As eminent nobles of long lineage in the Bluemoon faction, they were viewed with reverence by other noble households. At the same time, they were also well known for their deep knowledge in the arts.

The Schuberts had many musicians, artists, leatherworkers, jewelers, and all sorts of other artists numbered among them. While their expertise varied, many heads of the family had dabbled in the arts for generations.

Thus, the gardens of their manor in the suburbs of Lunatear were quite idiosyncratic, filled with sculptures carved by the Marquess Schubert of many generations prior. Mia and her friends walked through this mysterious scene as they headed for the manor.

One of the statues had some moss growing on it. Mia stared at it. "My... What is this?"

It was made of white stone and twisted from the ground up to the sky. One glance made it seem...seem like...

"It seems to be expressing the movement of waves through rock. Its twisting form, its roundness... Could it be a mushroom?"

"This piece is meant to represent the Hope of Tomorrow." Mia turned toward that voice. "Welcome to our manor, Your Highness." The young noblewoman before them had a soft grin that overflowed with grace. She was Letizia, the girl they had come to meet. Her long, flowing hair, a striking deep blue, was tied behind her back in an elegant wave. She bowed. "It is a pleasure to see you."

Mia responded to her energetic greeting with a curtsy. "It is my pleasure as well, Letizia. You seem to be in good spirits." Mia grinned before returning her eyes to the statue before them. "So this is the Hope of Tomorrow, is it? I...see..."

Letizia giggled as she held a hand over her lips. "It's quite difficult to make heads or tails of, isn't it?"

Mia shook her head. “No, I believe I understand its essence.”

She folded her arms as she examined the artwork. *So this represents the Hope of Tomorrow. That must be why it’s mushroom-shaped. Oho! I think I could get along well with this sculpture.*

Well, it *is* technically true that the beauty of art is in the eye of its beholder.

“You really do have a wonderful garden. The combination of trees and sculptures creates such a wondrous space.”

Mia scanned the entirety of the garden. Just like the mushroom sculpture (properly: The Hope of Tomorrow), there were countless sculptures taller than humans that jutted out from the ground, and winding between them were trees...or perhaps it was more accurate to say that the mushroom sculpture (properly: the Hope of Tomorrow) had been encroached on by the forest. In any case, it was a truly curious garden.

Mia scanned her surroundings, but suddenly, her eyes stopped. “My, is that...?” She was staring at a thick tree root, and atop it were... “Hey, Rina, aren’t those mushrooms?”

“They are. They’re known as trixy caps.”

There were even *real* mushrooms in this garden!

“Oho! Growing mushrooms in a garden! How elegant!” remarked Mia as she approached the fungi. They looked like fat fish and had spots that looked like round eyes and a mouth. They were surely, undoubtedly...

The brown color they exhibit exudes nutrients! These are surely delicious! Cutting up two or three would be a perfect addition to any sauce.

Mushroommeister Mia’s senses were telling her that given how they looked, there was no way these mushrooms were poisonous! But mushrooms were hard to figure out. Mia had learned that lesson the hard way.

She looked at Citrina. “Are they poisonous?”

She tilted her head. “Poisonous...?” She put a finger to her cheek and took a moment to consider. “I don’t think they have what would be *considered* poison.”

“Oho! So, they *are* safe!” Mia simply stared at the mushrooms for a long while. Finally, she let out a sigh. Just what did these mushrooms taste like? For a brief moment, she let her imagination run wild. Then, she came back to her senses. She realized she had completely been ignoring Letizia. The goal of today was gaining her

as an ally, and so, the mushrooms could wait.

Mia cleared her throat. “In any case, I want to offer my deepest apologies for suddenly requesting your time today, but I do look forward to getting to know you better.” Mia flashed her a hospitable grin.

To gain the trust of a devoted husband, you first need to gain the trust of his dear wife! I’ve got to give this my all today. Inwardly muttering a phrase that sounded like an idiom but was strikingly *not*, Mia looked around the Schuberts’ garden.

“Still, your family really does have quite charming tastes.”

“We sometimes hold tea parties closer to the manor where you can enjoy the sculptures alongside your tea. Performers sometimes come as well.”

“Oho! The Schuberts really are a family of the arts, I see.” Mia never forgot to bring casual flattery.

Letizia spoke hesitantly. “Quite honestly, I’d like to improve my cooking skills in order to also improve my skills in the arts, but...Sapphias never lets me. He says it’s nothing for a noble of high rank like me to bother herself with...”

“My, I don’t think that’s true at all. Ruby and Esmeralda have both accompanied me in such cooking parties before, and Rina has come to join us today as well. I’ve even cooked alongside Miss Rafina.” Letizia brought a hand to her mouth and let out a gasp. “There’s no need to worry about how it could affect your reputation. You only need to cook with pride!”

Rather than reputation, it was the *food itself* that she needed to worry about. But unfortunately, there were none present who made this observation.

If I’m going to use Letizia to win over Sapphias through his stomach, I need to eliminate any factors that could harm her motivation.

Or quite worrisomely, she might be *punching* him through the stomach rather than winning him over.

“My apologies, Lady Letizia. Prince Sion of Sunkland and the daughter of Outcount Rudolvon have arrived.”

The moment she received that report, Letizia began to scowl. She flashed a troubled grin to Mia. “I’ve made all the necessary preparations for his visit, but welcoming a prince of Sunkland really is quite nerve-racking. I’m quite worried I’ll earn the jealousy of the other noble lady as well.”

“There’s nothing to worry about, Letizia. This is a selfish

gathering that I've forced upon you all. Not to mention, you'll be an Etoiler quite soon too. There's no need to feel inferior." She shook her head. "More importantly, let's meet up with the others. Will you show us inside? The main event today is cooking, after all."

Letizia responded with a nod.

Chapter 32: The Noble Ladies Are on the Same Wavelength!

Backed by her entourage of young noble ladies, Mia rushed through the hallways. Half a step behind her, with her head held high, was Letizia. She exhibited the perfect demeanor of a Tearmoon noble.

Letizia Schubert was the eldest daughter of Marquess Schubert and engaged to Sapphias, the heir to the Bluemoon family. The best word to describe her would be "clever"...when it comes to everything but cooking, that is. For example, upon learning that the daughter of Outcount Rudolvon would be joining them today, she said nothing. She made no complaints about an outcount girl visiting the home of a marquess. Such would not be appropriate given the expected values of a young woman from an eminent household.

In Tearmoon, outcounts were inarguably country bumpkins. It was simply common sense. However, Letizia didn't think this common sense was unchanging or universal, and she knew exactly how others would look at her should she act upon this common sense. It would be unsightly and unfavorable.

Letizia also paid little mind to the origins of Mia's maid and the unknown origins of Citrina's friend Bel. She didn't run her mouth where she shouldn't. She knew that was a way to curry Mia's displeasure, and she equally knew that it would be disadvantageous for Sapphias. She was well aware of how to discern the logic behind situations, and she was quite skilled at putting this to practice too. She had the admirable knowledge and skills to keep the economy of her domain running flawlessly should she ever be put in charge of it, and had she been born the daughter of a merchant, she would have certainly acted in a higher capacity in the family business than was the norm for daughters.

Thus, Letizia was an incredibly clever girl, which was a rarity among the daughters of eminent nobles. But more than anything,

she absolutely *adored* Sapphias. She loved him to pieces! To bits! She loved him so much that she would spend the next day singing to herself whenever he appeared in her dreams—in fact, she'd basically spend the whole day doing a whole musical number. She loved him so much that before words like "let's have you cook a great meal to treat Sapphias!" and "you've gotta give this your all!" her natural alacrity, sharp skills for reasoning, and ironclad judgment faded away like the mist. She loved him from the absolute bottom of her heart.

But for Sapphias, this was truly tragic.

In any case, Letizia was ready to give this cooking party her all. But despite these feelings, the kitchen wasn't where she led her guests.

"Your Highness, I would absolutely love to show you to the kitchens as quickly as possible, but Sapphias has yet to arrive. My deepest apologies, but could you wait here for the time being?"

"Why, I don't mind at all, but...Sapphias is coming?"

"Yes. He absolutely insisted on helping us. He said it would be terrible should I accidentally burn myself or cut a finger."

Mia lowered her gaze. "So Sapphias has quite strong feelings for you, I see. Oho ho!" Mia wore the slightest of grins.

Hm, I wonder if this is to prevent Letizia and I from growing close. I suppose he really does deserve our suspicions... Mia quickly dismissed those thoughts with a shake of her head. *That's right. I was trying not to think about that today.*

Indeed, in holding this cooking party, Mia had decided on one thing and one thing alone: having faith in Sapphias. There were many reasons for this. One was that she wanted to believe him given the pact they had made. Another was that if he turned out to be innocent, she didn't want to leave any ill will behind. Once doubt crept in, there was no end to it, and it had the power to conceal the truth. One other of her reasons was that mistrust was a chink in her armor that the Serpents could pray upon. But most importantly...

Abel still trusts him, so I shall as well! Mia cast aside her logical left brain in favor of a *love-filled* left brain. *If I can't even trust the people I love, I'm sure that in the future, my lack of trust will lead to failure.*

Thus, Mia wouldn't doubt Sapphias. She commanded her logical left brain bent on questioning Sapphias to take a nap and instead

processed all her thoughts in love-mode.

Mia had two goals today. One was to get close to Letizia. If they were friends, trusting or doubting Sapphias wouldn't matter; he would never betray Letizia. As for the other...

I need to make tasty food that Abel will enjoy! I've got to give it my all! That's *what I'm after today!*

Oddly, Mia and Letizia were on the exact same wavelength. The circumstances had grown graver...or perhaps that was only due to imagination. In any case, Mia clenched her fist and got to work.

As Mia was firing herself up, the Youth Adventuring Squad led by Captain Bel began exploring the room.

"What is this, Miss Letizia?" Bel curiously pointed out an instrument adorning the wall.

"It's an instrument used by the heads of our family for generations." Letizia took the stringed instrument off the wall. "You use this bow to..." She tested out a doleful note.

"Wow, Letizia! You're really good!" Bel was completely enraptured by the instrument. Citrina just stood smiling beside her.

On the other hand, Patty and the two other children were still staring at the lineup of curious instruments on the wall. Kiryl couldn't hide his interest in the strange and novel musical devices. Both Yanna and Patty grinned as they watched him.

...They were much better at being older sisters than Bel.

Patty casually perused the instruments until, suddenly, one caught her eye. She had seen it before.

"Huh? This is..." She reached for it without thinking, but her hand was suddenly snatched. She let out a gasp.

"My apologies. This is an incredibly valuable instrument donated to us by House Clausius," said a maid with a smile that seemed plastered onto her face.

Patty's eyes widened. "Gerta? Huh? Why...?" Her words were barely a whisper, but her heart was certain that for a moment, she felt the maid's grip on her strengthen. But in an instant, it was gone.

"Please do not touch it. It is incredibly valuable." With that, the maid bowed and left the room. Her plastered smile never faltered.

Chapter 33: Sapphias's Faith and Dario's Fierce Fight... Wait, There's a Fight?

"By the way, Sion, I don't see Keithwood with you. Did something happen to him?" With this realization, Mia was yanked out of her thoughts. She looked toward the Sunkland prince.

"Right, Keithwood." He put on a bitter grin. "It seems that he has some business to take care of. He left as soon as we arrived, but I have no clue what that business could be... Perhaps he's simply trying to be considerate." Sion assumed that Keithwood was trying to allow Sion and Tiona some alone time together. Surprisingly, he was off the mark. It was nothing so carefree. Right now, Keithwood was facing a battle and retreat was not an option.

There was a carriage stopped on a road near the Schuberts' residence. Keithwood sneaked inside to find his old comrade in arms, Sapphias.

"Lord Sapphias. It's been a while."

"So, you're here, Keithwood. It has." Sapphias greeted Keithwood with a calm grin, but suddenly, his expression darkened. "I know your wounds may have yet to heal from our battle at Saint-Noel Academy. My apologies for summoning you at such a time."

His sudden apology earned a bitter smile from Keithwood. "No, I am just glad I was not too late. Her Highness Princess Mia and the Tearmoon Empire are important to us in Sunkland as well. It is only natural for me to offer my power in defending them from danger." His expression turned fierce. "What is the strategy?"

"Right. Our fundamental plan is to keep what they're cooking to something simple. We were hoping for a vegetable stew."

"Then they would only have to cut the ingredients."

"Exactly. Dario and I... Do you remember the boy who accompanied me as my attendant to Saint-Noel's?"

"Of course. He was a Schubert, yes?"

“He was. He’s Letizia’s younger brother. Dario went to a veteran maid of the Schuberts’ for advice, and she suggested this plan. Through slicing the vegetables, they’ll feel as if they’re truly cooking, and as long as no strange spices are added, they can’t fail. It has her seal of approval. She even offered to taste test the food and adjust the spices should it be unpalatable.”

Keithwood scowled. “I see. So, she shall be a sacrifice. She has my deepest condolences. If only…”

Sapphias nodded. “I know. I want to limit their victims. So, I have another plan.”

“The details?”

Sapphias gave a solemn nod and brought his voice to a whisper. “We buy as much time as possible, and while Her Highness waits, we feed her all the sweets she could want.”

“Indeed… You thought this through. She’s the type who loses motivation in the kitchen when her stomach is full. We may be able to keep her from making any changes to the recipe.”

Sapphias folded his arms and nodded once again. “Her Highness is a gastronome. If we present her with tea cakes before they begin cooking, she won’t be able to resist. I have already asked Dario to help us with this. Until I arrive, he should be showering Miss Mia with snacks.”

“Can we really leave him with so much responsibility?”

Sapphias dismissed Keithwood’s worries with a grin. “Despite his looks, he’s Marquess Schubert’s heir. I have no doubts that he will perform admirably.” His grin grew kinder. “He really is quite skilled. He performed his duties as my attendant at Saint-Noel’s well. I hope that as my brother-in-law and my right-hand man, he will one day aid me in managing the Bluemoon faction.”

Sapphias spoke as if his eyes were already on the brilliant future that lay ahead.

Sapphias had quite high expectations of Dario, who was currently fighting fiercely…fiercely for Dario, that is.

First, as had been the plan, he conspired to get Mia munching on tea cakes.

“Why don’t we offer everyone some tea and a light lunch while we wait for Lord Sapphias to arrive? We have some fillets of Sunkland beef. We could cook those for everyone. What do you think, sis?”

His choice of snack somewhat revealed his wish to fill them up, but anyways...

Letizia responded to her brother's suggestion with a laugh. "What do you mean, Dario? The best motivation for cooking is an empty stomach."

She completely dismissed him! She had seen through their plan! Letizia was an incredibly clever woman when it came to anything aside from cooking.

"Sapphias really is quite late. I'm sure he'll be here soon. Wouldn't it be best to begin preparing?"

Letizia's gusto sent Dario into a panic. "We can't, sis. We have to wait for Lord Sapphias! He might be really upset with you if we don't..." He spoke this killer phrase casually, but they were magic words that could get his sister to regain her composure in almost any situation.

"Dario. Not that it's important, but Sapphias will be family to you one day. Wouldn't it be best to call him familiarly by name alone? I'm sure that's what he wishes." Letizia was clever, but when it came to Sapphias, she could be a bit of an idiot.

"Right. Well, that'll come with time." Dario casually dismissed her. "But anyways, I really don't think it's a good idea to start cooking before he arrives. I'm sure he's looking forward to doing it with you like he always is." Dario was clearly used to having to convince his sister, but he had made a slight miscalculation.

"As always, you say? I see. Your words ring very true, Dario." Mia took a step forward. She gave a grand nod. "But is it not boring to always do things the same way?"

At this moment, Mia's words were *highly* unappreciated.

"Uh, what do you mean by that, Your Highness?" Dario's disgust nearly made its way to his face, but he barely managed to keep his composure.

"Why, that's obvious! Love means surprises! Wouldn't it be enjoyable for Sapphias to arrive with food already on the table as well?"

Those words and the wave they created had a cold sweat running down Dario's back. His instincts were telling him that this was *bad*. But then, someone joined her, and things got even worse.

"There should be nothing wrong with that. The stew planned today only requires its ingredients to be cut and boiled. It should be impossible to fail." With the same clean, plastered-on grin as

always, the old maid Gerta offered her advice.

"No, but..." Against this veteran maid, Dario was at a loss for words. With her confirmation, Dario was at once convinced that such a stew would be suitable for these circumstances, but against the unpredictable force that was Mia, he had started to lose confidence in that conviction.

Gerta giggled before speaking to him in a mere whisper. "Don't worry. I shall taste it."

With that, the load had been lifted off Dario's chest. This old maid was a veteran who could easily do all her employers wished. She was sure to be able to taste test the dish, lightly adjust the seasoning, and make it palatable. There was no question about it.

Plus...any more resistance would just make this more annoying.

"Well, if you say so."

The next Marquess Schubert was swept away by her waves. It had been as easy as taking a breath.

Chapter 34: A Meeting in the Shadows of History… A Serpent Conspiracy

We now turn back the clock to the night after Letizia received her letter from Mia. The stage was a manor inside the capitol, and gathered inside one of its rooms was a group. In one sense, this meeting was historical. In another, it was simply inside history's shadow.

Three were gathered there. One was a Serpent born to the Fire Clan of the Equestrian Kingdom of the name Ka Kunlou. Another was a skilled assassin and a survivor of a seafaring people known as the Visalians. And the other…

"Well, looky here. If it isn't one of the olden Serpents of Tearmoon, Gerta. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Just to be clear, you weren't followed, were you?"

The old maid Gerta looked at Kunlou. Her plastered smile never faltered. "You believe I would allow myself to be followed?"

He chuckled. "Sorry. That was kind of rude, wasn't it?"

"Well, I understand your caution. I hear that your own princess has fallen into the Great Sage's hands." While her smile remained, her eyes alone were so pointed it could pierce the soul. "I told you when you failed in your schemes earlier. Their group is best approached with caution."

He chuckled again. "Convincing words for a pioneer in hiding in the shadows to survive." Kunlou scratched his chin. "So the evil clutches of the Great Sage of the Empire are already around you, huh? It seems like rushing your plan to kidnap Marquess Schubert's daughter is where your luck ran out." He teasingly shrugged his shoulders. "I get it. The eldest son of Duke Bluemoon is quite loyal to his fiancée. Taking her as hostage to force him to stage a coup would be a blow for a Great Sage who's supplying food to her people through the local nobles. There's no way the Bluemoon faction would just be forgiven. It's a solid plan."

He clapped and cackled. Kunlou didn't view Mia as someone

they could just let run wild. If Tearmoon continued down its path to peace and stability, things would get boring. Plus, her fangs had exceeded the confinements of Tearmoon and were now sinking into the whole continent. Her efforts needed to be hindered.

"The House of Duke Bluemoon is a cornerstone in leading the central nobility. He's an asset on your side, but a grave danger as an enemy. If you can get some of the central nobility involved in a coup, the Tearmoon the Great Sage worked so hard to rebuild will once again fall into chaos in a flash. If that happens..."

"...It will mean the return of the first emperor's plan to soak the Fertile Crescent with tears." Gerta quietly finished his words.

Yes, the plot of destruction that had continued uninterrupted since the days of Tearmoon's first emperor had yet to be fully circumvented. Tearmoon still produced little food in its own lands. Any amount of chaos was enough to lead to famine. At a glance, their plan was solid. However...

She's too set in her old ways. Makes sense for an olden Serpent. Maybe they'll be free of their first emperor's ambitions one day. Kunlou calmly evaluated this plan. With Mia and Sapphias staunch allies, things were boring. At the very least, Kunlou could agree that there was a need to throw a wedge in the relationship between Mia and the Four Dukes.

"But things aren't quite going according to plan, are they?" His tone was derisive, and finally, it earned a scowl from Gerta.

She gritted her teeth. "Lying low should have posed no problems. Researching House Clausius after all this time will prove fruitless. Serving House Schubert should not have been an issue for me."

It was counterproductive to attempt to kidnap Letizia while the Great Sage was still in Lunatear. It was better to carry it out while she was abroad. However, Gerta and the other Serpents panicked once they heard that those under Mia were investigating House Clausius. Scared that Mia may discover their pasts, they decided now was the time to carry out their scheme. And when would that be? Mia's cooking party.

"We do not know how it leaked, but we believe Princess Mia has caught wind of our plan to kidnap Lady Letizia."

Holding a cooking party now of all times was clearly unnatural. Not to mention, news of this party had reached their ears as soon as they decided to move up their timeline. It was incredibly likely that

she knew of their intentions.

"Yeah, it'd be too optimistic to assume the plot was still secret. 'Great Sage,' huh? She really is a genius."

Gerta cursed under her breath in vexation.

"So, what's the plan? You're not still planning on kidnapping her, are you?"

"I am almost certain it shall fail. Even should we succeed, it is doubtful any would truly consider the coup the work of Sapphias Etoile Bluemoon," said Gerta as she shook her head.

Kunlou nodded. "Right. Kidnapping her isn't going to work. So, why don't you try something else?" He took two vials from his breast pocket and placed them on the desk.

"And these are?"

"If you're cooking, then poison's gotta be involved."

"Poison?" Gerta looked at him like he was stupid. "That traitorous Yellowmoon is always around the Great Sage. How am I supposed to subvert *her*?"

Kunlou dismissed her caustic words with a sneer and a cackle. "It's simple! You just have to offer yourself as a taste tester, O olden Serpent. You take the lead and then poison them all. So, hm...I suppose a soup or stew is what's on the menu."

"How foolish... You want me to drink poison and survive? The belief that faith and a strong will makes you immune to all toxins is the words of heretics. I'd appreciate it if you kept those strange ideas away from my ears."

"I'm not asking you to do the impossible. You just need to first drink the antidote. That's it." Kunlou pointed to one of the vials. "This one's the antidote, and this one's the poison. If you drink them at the same time, you won't be affected. It's a cheap trick, but it's convincing. Depending on your acting skills, that is."

Watching their conversation, the tattooed assassin only sighed. They both sounded like fools.

Chapter 35: A Lively…Art Discussion!

"Here is the kitchen." Letizia led them to the cook's room. Being inside a marquess's manor, it was quite large... It even rivaled the size of the kitchens of the Whitemoon Palace. It was truly impressive.

"My, this kitchen is wonderful!" exclaimed Mia, her arms crossed with a smug look. The aura around her—and to be clear, *only* the aura—was that of a first-rate chef.

"I'm glad you like it, Your Highness. I actually helped design this room," replied Letizia, somewhat bashfully but also somewhat proudly. "I just thought that if this room was going to be used for cooking, it had to have the proper facilities. It allows for those using it to cook more complex cuisines."

Though it'd be easier for me if you made something simple rather than "complex," thought Dario as he went over the lineup for today. First was his sister and Mia, but the two hitting it off so well was...unexpected. Keeping their rampage in check would be key to today's success.

Next, he watched as the daughter of Duke Yellowmoon gleefully chatted away with her friend Bel. It was uncertain how much help they'd be today. *I can't rely on the daughter of an important family, and for some reason, her friend seems like the type to cause trouble.* Dario had encountered Bel at Saint-Noel's, and while her eyes always sparkled with curiosity, right now, that sparkle seemed dangerous.

Next, he turned to Mia's maid, who was chatting with the daughter of Outcount Rudolvon. *I think her name was Anne. If she's a maid, she should be somewhat able to cook. But I don't know about the Rudolvon girl, or the two princes...* He curiously watched Sion and Abel as they conversed. *Strange... For some reason, the two princes seem a lot more capable at cooking than Princess Mia or my sister. But why?*

After sizing up his troops, Dario worked out a plan to safely bring today's cooking party to a close. He was sure they'd sweep

him away in unexpected directions, but he'd do his best to obtain the best results. His hidden grit—or really, his intense self-preservation instincts—would lead him there.

Still, his sincere efforts proved transient. Mia and the others had already begun their rampage.

"This stove is quite large. I think it's even bigger than the one we used at Saint-Noel's!"

Letizia giggled. "It's actually a bread stove made with the newest technology. It's made of ceramic, allowing for careful control of temperature."

"Oho! How wonderful! With a stove this big, we'll be able to make horse-shaped bread that's sized true to life!" This was Mia's chance to reimagine the pony-sized bread that Keithwood had once shot down! Her eyes sparkled with anticipation.

"That's right! When you told me about it once before, it caught my interest. Pony-sized horse-shaped bread sounds absolutely adorable! I'm sure It would be wonderful," exclaimed Letizia with a clap of her hands. For some reason, Mia's cooking senses seemed to match those of the artistically inclined.

"I knew some people would understand! It's quite difficult to properly shape, but Anne was able to help with the details. I'm quite particular about the shape of the ears..."

Letizia put a hand to her chin and scowled. "I perfectly understand. The shape of the ears is essential in depicting a horse." She *agreed* with her!

They should have been on two different wavelengths, but somehow, they had arrived at one, and the conversation was only picking up speed!

“I have a friend named Chloe, and according to her, some exotic cuisines feature…”

“My, you can eat those? But it’s blue, hm? How fascinating. It sounds beautiful, and it matches Sapphias perfectly…”

Sadly, no one interrupted her there. The conversation only continued.

“Oh…but meat tastes much better…when cooked on an open fire…than in an oven.” It was the Rudolvon family maid, Liora.

“Ah, so you’re here today too, Liora! How heartening. What do you mean it tastes better?” asked Mia.

“It tastes…completely different,” she responded with crossed arms.

Letizia clapped her hand. “I see! You mean that animals taste best when they’re cooked in their native environments, yes? And that spices work best on meat when they’re taken from the same forest as the animal? Or…”

Liora tilted her head. “I think…that’s what I mean.” She nodded.

How does that even make any sense?! Baking meat and grilling meat are completely different preparation methods! Isn’t that *what they’re talking about?!* Unable to bear listening to them any longer, Dario offered a rebuttal inside his own heart. *But really, Lord Sapphias. How am I supposed to stop this group on my own? Please hurry…*

After just a few minutes, Dario was half-ready to give up. He had some minimal cooking experience, and as much as that allowed him to understand just how *terrible* the conversation unfolding before him was, it also broke him all the faster.

Still, he gathered himself. “Um, for now, I think it’s fine to start the basic preparations, sis.” With a scratch of his head, he began barking orders.

They’re just cooking vegetables. They can’t do anything strange. Prince Abel and Prince Sion know how to handle blades. Things will be fine.

Thinking they’d listen to him, Dario decided to leave seasoning the stew to the kids.

“Well, if we’re cooking stew, then mushrooms are a must…”

He ignored this inflammatory remark and watched the madness

from afar.

Just get here already, Lord Sapphias. Please!

Dario waited for his reinforcements' arrival with anticipation.

Chapter 36: Abduction

While Mia and the others enjoyed some cooking chat, Yanna watched Patty as they worked on preparing the meal.

Patty seems off somehow. Yanna alone had adroitly picked up on the change in her friend. *She was fine until we saw all those instruments, but ever since we met that maid, for some reason...*

At first, Yanna just assumed that she was sulking over the scolding. The maid had been gentle with her words, but Patty had gotten yelled at for messing around all the same. Of course it could bother her.

But Yanna quickly changed her thinking. Patty wasn't so fragile as to let something like that get to her. She was young, but she was tough. Slight slander wasn't enough to even change her expression, much less for her to seriously engage. Given her personality, Yanna was certain that being scolded by an adult wouldn't be enough to dampen her spirits.

Yet that was exactly why Yanna was so worried. Patty was even more reticent than usual.

Does she feel bad for having fun by herself, away from her brother? It doesn't seem that way...

Rather than guilty, her expression seemed panicked. But why?

"Um... I'm going to the restroom." Patty stood up in trepidation and informed a young maid standing nearby.

"Oh, I'll go with you then." Yanna's instincts were telling her that she couldn't leave Patty alone, so she quickly jumped in and sent a glance to her younger brother.

"Yanna?" Kiryl tried to go with her, but she shook her head.

"I'll be right back. Stay and help Miss Mia, okay?" Next, Yanna glanced at Captain Bel of the Adventuring Squad. For some reason, Mia seemed too busy to bother.

Luckily, Bel picked up on the meaning of her glance. "Okay! I'll watch Kiryl for you. Go on ahead," she said with a winning grin. "All right, Kiryl! You're peeling vegetables with me. Let me show you how it's done." There was something quite haughty about her

words. Clearly, she was at the age where she wanted to play the older kid.

Yanna thanked her with a quick bow and hurried after Patty, who was already heading down the hall with a maid.

"Wait, Patty! Is something wrong? You've been acting weird..."

Patty shook her head. "No. It's nothing. I'm just...imagining things."

"But—?!" Someone had covered her mouth with their hand. She let out a muffled scream as she tried to bite the hand and run, but...

"What terrible manners to act this way around the princess."

A thin arm wrapped around Yanna's neck and squeezed. She was yanked into the air, and she kicked her legs in a frantic attempt to escape.

"Agh!!!" she screamed. It was pure violence, the same she used to encounter in the slums. Her young body was powerless against it.

Before her, Patty, too, had her arms locked behind her back. The young maid that led them down the halls watched them, expressionless.

"If you scream, I'll kill her." A voice whispered in Yanna's ear. Her face twisted in agony as she realized there was no way Patty could have heard that whisper. Still, Patty looked her way. Her lips made slight movements, but no sound escaped them.

The person restraining Patty muttered, "So you can read lips. I'm shocked. You really are one taught by the Serpents. Considering you knew my name and reacted to that instrument, you must have some ties to the Clausius family. But why is a child such as you around the Great Sage? Did she capture you, or are you acting as a Serpent...?" Once that whisper left her lips, the woman restraining Yanna—Gerta—turned to the young maid. "You may release her. You know what will happen to you should you resist us, yes?" She tightened her grip around Yanna's neck. Breathing became harder as her head grew fuzzy. "A Visalian. I see the Great Sage is skilled at figuring out our secrets. As despicable as she may be, it ends today..."

Her eyes had been trained on Yanna's forehead as she spoke those words. Yanna looked into her dark eyes, but she didn't give up hope. Rather, a deep sense of relief filled her chest. *Thank goodness I left Kiryl behind...* Leaving her younger brother with the girl who had saved their lives was Yanna's only solace, but at the same time, another thought flitted through her mind. *But how would*

I have felt if I had left him with someone we couldn't *trust?*

As her consciousness faded, her focus was not on herself, but the feelings of her perpetually frowning friend.

Chapter 37: Mia Can Handle Vegetables Too, Y'know!

While this harrowing kidnapping was occurring in a corner of the Schuberts' manor, something harrowing in its own right was going down in the kitchen.

"Let's begin the preparations, Dario."

Under his sister's command, Dario began giving orders.

"But in our briefing session..." The family cooks all scowled. They were painfully aware of Letizia's limits in the kitchen.

"I know. It'll be fine. We have plenty of the vegetables we need them to cut. We'll be able to buy some time. Things will be fine. They'll be fine..." Seeing Dario like this only had them growing paler. He seemed to be talking more to himself than them. Still, they couldn't refuse his orders. Now that the ball was rolling, there was no stopping it.

The family's servants immediately carried in the ingredients for the day. Mia couldn't help but gasp seeing the pile on the table. "Moons, there are so many!" The vegetables completely filled the table from corner to corner. As a test, Mia took one in her hand and grinned. "They do indeed look delicious."

Incidentally, while the Mia of the past might have been as selfish as to say, "The only foods I'll ever eat are meat and sweets!", that Mia was no longer. Now, she could handle vegetables too! She had been forced to consume all sorts of questionable items in the dungeons. Properly washed, fresh vegetables could be considered nothing but a feast.

"This Tearmoon carrot has an absolutely exquisite color. They're excellent when cooked with butter to bring out their sweetness, and they make a perfect addition to cake." The imperial chef and Rania had trained her taste buds well. She was no longer the woman she once was. Now, Mia knew how to enjoy vegetables. She knew how to handle them (culinarily, of course).

Letizia giggled, impressed. "My, Princess Mia! I see you know a

lot about cooking."

Mia grinned. "Well, I don't know *everything*." As she said this, she thought, *Letizia may be passionate, but I'm not sure about her skills in the kitchen.* This was an incredibly rare instance of Mia having a proper thought. *Sapphias was right by her side when we cooked last time. Is that because he knew her limits? If that's the case, his reluctance in us holding this party might actually be because he fears his fiancée's skills.*

In a completely abnormal turn of events, no-good detective Mia was incredibly close to the truth. Was this a miracle of her love-filled brain? Was it proof that she was starting to grow as a person? Upon miraculously getting so close to triumph, Mia reached her conclusion: *Oho! I need to be sure to teach her well so that Sapphias won't have to worry so much! I can also get close to her and strengthen my relationship with him at the same time! This is perfect!*

...She was merely *deceptively* close to the truth. Instead, the situation was only growing more dire.

For that, I need to make sure this stew turns out well! Vegetable stew does taste good, but it needs a punch. Just what can I add...?

A phrase flashed through Mia's mind. "The Hope of Tomorrow. That's right..." With this terrible idea, Mia scanned the room and approached the girl she needed. "Do you have a moment, Rina?"

Rina simply stared back at her, dumbfounded. Mia whispered in her ear to explain. "Can I get you to look for those mushrooms? You know, the ones from the garden. The ones that looked like round fish. I think they were called...tetrodo caps?"

"Do you mean 'trixy caps'?"

"Yes, those." Mia nodded. "They aren't poisonous, correct?"

She just wanted to double-check. Mia compartmentalized mushrooms in her head into two groups, but that wasn't between those poisonous or not, but *edible* or not. And if a mushroom was *edible*, it couldn't be unappetizing. There was no such thing as a disgusting mushroom. To Mia, this was a self-evident truth, and considering how tasty the trixy caps had looked, if they weren't poisonous, not including them in the stew would be blasphemy.

I'll teach Letizia the essence of mushrooms! Now, all I have to do is strengthen our friendship. Oho ho!

On top of creating a tasty mushroom stew, she'd deepen her bond with Letizia. She was taking down two birds with one stone, and she couldn't help but grin at her efficiency.

“It’s true they don’t have the sort of poison that could kill someone, but...” Citrina seemed like she had something more to say, but immediately, all she could do was shudder.

“Lady Letizia. We have prepared the ingredients. Why don’t we begin?”

When had she made it back? Gerta, the old maid, had returned without sound and approached Letizia. Citrina silently watched the two converse.

“...I see. So Princess Mia saw through...” muttered Citrina.

“Understood. I shall be right back.” Gerta silently slipped out of the kitchen.

“Shall we begin cooking, Your Highness?” asked Letizia.

Mia tilted her head. “I suppose. I would like to wait for Patty and Yanna to return, but...” Cheering up Patty had been one of Mia’s goals in holding this party. Still, growing close with Letizia was the main event.

Raising Letizia’s cooking skills and growing closer to Sapphias are my main goals for today. I’d like to show Abel my skills too!

Tiona was next to enter Mia’s line of sight. She was well accustomed to cutting vegetables back home, and she burned with passion coming face-to-face with the pile before her. She carefully examined the knife in her hand, and it was clear she was dying to begin. She had the same look in her eyes as a knight holding the finest of swords.

It did beg the question of whether cooking was such a gruesome event, but anyways, Mia decided it was best to not keep her waiting.

That’s when Mia was hit with a finishing blow. “My apologies, Your Highness. The girls are...” Gerta had approached her. Apparently, Patty and Yanna were playing with the instruments in the other room. “I’ve instructed a younger maid to bring them here in a short while.”

“Hm, I see...” Mia looked to Letizia and nodded. “In that case, let the cooking begin!”

Chapter 38: Mia Never Changes

Upon Mia declaring the start of the event, Tiona approached her. “It’s been quite a long time, Miss Mia. Thank you so much for inviting me to such a lovely event today.”

“Greetings, Tiona. I’m glad to see you’ve been well. How are Cyril and your father?”

Tiona grinned. “Thank you for asking. They’re doing well. Cyril seems to really be enjoying learning at your school, and I hear that Princess Arshia is treating him well.” Her expression darkened. “He’s grown up to be so reliable. It almost makes me feel a bit sad.”

“Tee hee! I didn’t know Outcount Rudolvon had a son. So, you have a younger brother too.” Letizia joined the conversation with an elegant smile. “I’m quite jealous. My brother, Dario, is still as unreliable as ever. I worry he won’t be able to properly support my Sapphias...”

Hearing this, Dario awkwardly scratched his cheek.

“Perhaps you just feel that way because you’re always around him, Lady Letizia. If you spend some time apart, you may begin to see him differently.” Now it was Sion’s turn to jump into the conversation.

“Do you really think so, Your Highness?” Letizia seemed to not quite believe him.

He shrugged. “I do. Even I was late in noticing that change in my own brother. But thanks to Mia, I was able to see it just in time.”

As this conversation of brotherly love continued, Tiona turned to Mia. “Which vegetables did you want me to cut?” She seemed awfully excited.

“Hm...” Mia crossed her arms and began to think. At least, she pretended to do so. In reality, Mia was still not quite sure whether they should begin. “For now, let’s start at one end of the table and go to the other,” she said while picking up a moonglow onion and prince potato.

“If I have your permission to speak, adding moonglow onions

too early will cause them to melt. If you would like to enjoy their texture, they should be added as late as possible," came Gerta's voice from behind Mia. "Thus, I believe it's best to first cut those fullmoon radishes."

"I see. In that case, Tiona, could you start with the fullmoon radishes and cut them into, um..."

"Slices should be best."

"Slices, please?" Mia quickly copied her orders. *This Gerta is really something!* Mia gazed at her in wonder. There was a refined grace about her movements that was incredibly praiseworthy. She walked through the room without so much as a sound. Mia couldn't help but draw in her breath as she watched her practiced movements. *She gives proper orders at the proper time to lead us to the proper solution. She truly is amazing. I should have expected nothing less from a maid of a marquess family.*

The only emotion Mia held for this maid was awe! Unfortunately, that meant there was no room for mistrust, but so much was perhaps obvious.

"Then could you help me, Prince Sion?" asked Tiona. With that, Sion took a place by her side and the two got to work. Watching them cut vegetables so amicably had Mia grinning.

Oho ho! Until just recently, seeing Sion so close with a girl would have made me livid. In the previous timeline, Mia took to waiting under the belief that Sion's heart had to be hers. Had *that* Mia seen Sion and Tiona like this, she would have surely flown into a fit of rage and jealousy. But now, that very same Mia was...

"Shall we get to work too, Mia?" Abel grinned at her.

She giggled. "Yes, let's." She flashed him a grin and bathed in the glory of happiness.

This is wonderful. There's nothing better than cooking alongside your dear knight in shining armor! Mia regained her senses. *Wait! As much as I'd love to flirt with Abel, teaching Letizia to cook is my goal for the day! She seems a bit down in the dumps since Sapphias hasn't arrived yet. I need to be considerate.*

With these brazen thoughts, Mia turned to Letizia. "Would you like to work with us? I think we need to focus on the shape of the vegetables. For example, we can turn these potatoes into horses and..."

"If I may, the potatoes will lose their shape once we boil them, so there is no need to shape them."

“Hm. Like I thought, taste is much more important than presentation.” Mia was completely oblivious to the fact that Gerta had her dancing on the palm of her hand. She had the same guilelessness as the aurelia floating through the sea. Yup, Mia never changes.

Chapter 39: Truly!

Having received clandestine orders from Mia, Citrina jumped into action. She slipped out of the kitchen and hurried down the halls while ensuring none caught sight of her.

You see, Citrina remembered exactly what had brought them to this manor; Sapphias was going to stage a coup, and Mia had come to stop him. This wasn't a playdate. They had a *mission*. She certainly hadn't forgotten about it to instead focus her energy on playing with Bel! Not at all! Truly!

Thus, Citrina silenced her footsteps to mask her presence as she continued down the hall. Even if someone did catch her, she'd be able to make excuses. She could just say she was going to the bathroom. The insolence that was walking through a marquess's manor as she pleased could be wiped away with her Etoiline status and sweet smile.

I only have a problem if I run into a Serpent. If Gerta is one, then surely she's not the only one hiding here. Citrina recalled Gerta's careful footwork from earlier. The way she had made herself invisible was a technique Citrina knew well. Not to mention, she had approached Letizia as soon as she entered the room to try to entice her. *She tried to get us to start cooking immediately, but why?*

Most likely, something had occurred which Gerta hadn't foreseen, causing her to drop her act as a normal maid for just a moment. She had made a mistake in masking her presence where Citrina could see her.

Miss Mia might be thinking that maid is implicated in Sapphias Etoile Bluemoon's coup. If that's the case, she's probably not here alone. She almost definitely has some other Serpents with her. I need to be careful!

Of course, without doubt, Citrina consistently had her defenses up. She was being cautious. No way had she been distracted by getting to hang out with Bel, nor did she let her guard down because she was too preoccupied with glee at getting to spend the day out with her best friend. Not at all! Truly!

In any case, Citrina masked her presence, put on the act of a lost child in case she was caught, and headed for the gardens. When she arrived, she made a beeline for that oddly shaped and abstruse statue. Its irregular shape was a tad creepy, and when walking alone, it was enough to inspire fear—well, so long as the person walking alone was Mia. As a rationalist, Citrina was just thinking it would be a pain if an assassin was hiding near it.

Citrina carefully observed her surroundings as she made her way through the gardens. She had arrived at her destination: the twisting, human-sized statue named "The Hope of Tomorrow." Or really, something hiding in the nearby tree roots...mushrooms.

"There they are."

Citrina was afraid she'd be caught, so she let out a sigh of relief once she had made it safely to her destination. But that was also the moment she let her guard down!

Citrina had been able to relax her defenses as of late. Freed from the Serpents, she was able to live the life of an average noble girl (even if she had saved a king using an antidote she had), and it had dulled her senses. Thus, she had been completely oblivious to the shadow approaching her!

"Boo!"

Citrina shrieked. She took a step backward and prepared to throw a blinding agent at her assailant, but as soon as she caught sight of them, she thought better of it. She put a hand to her chest and sighed. "Bel..."

Standing before her was Bel, grinning from ear to ear like a mischievous child. Kiryl popped his head out from behind her.

"What are you doing here?"

"When I realized you had disappeared, I thought you might have come out here to explore these fun-looking gardens!" Bel responded with a grin.

Citrina was relieved, but then, she furrowed her brow. "You weren't followed, were you?"

"Huh? Followed...?" Bel was clearly confused for a moment. Then, she turned to look behind her. Citrina followed her gaze, and even Kiryl turned to look at the manor as well. At some point, a few shadows had— Just kidding! The garden was empty. Thankfully, they hadn't been followed.

It's worth mentioning that Citrina's worries were not completely unfounded. Certainly, any of Mia's group going off on

their own would have triggered Gerta's alarm bells. The same couldn't be said for the cautious Citrina, but the two members of Bel's Adventuring Squad stomping down the halls without a care in the world would have gotten them caught and captured immediately.

But luckily for Bel, there were few Serpents in the manor, and all their suspicions were currently focused on Patty. Thus, the Serpents hadn't been able to keep these two noble ladies in check.

"Still, Rina felt some eyes on us for a moment..." Citrina tilted her head and pondered for a second, but ultimately, she shook her head. "As long as we haven't been caught, we should be fine. Let's hurry back."

"But what did you come out here for, Rina?" asked Bel.

Citrina grinned and showed Bel her spoils. They were round, fishlike...mushrooms. "These are called trixy caps. Another name for them is chuckling blowfish." Citrina glanced down at the mushrooms. "Rina's had them just once. They have quite the odd effect..." she said with a bewitching, suggestive grin.

Chapter 40: Surrender Yourself to Wishful Thinking

The eyes Citrina had sensed had been no trick of her imagination; two men had been intensely staring at the two girls. They were hiding in the statue's shadow, and their names...were Sapphias and Keithwood. Once they had seen them pluck the mysterious mushrooms and disappear, Sapphias turned to Keithwood with a quivering voice. "So...what do you think?"

"Miss Yellowmoon should have extensive knowledge about poisons, medicines, and mushrooms. She's a smart girl. At least, I believe so..."

"Yes, indeed. I know well how sharp she is despite her young age. I know it well! And yet..." Sapphias scowled.

“We are both Tearmoon nobles who have pledged our allegiance to Princess Mia, and I hear Her Highness rescued her. It would not be strange if she was unable to refuse a request from Princess Mia...” said Sapphias, clutching his head as if trying to fight back a headache. “It’s easy to believe that any words coming from her have some deeper meaning behind them. In most cases, that would be true, but...”

“Are you saying that Her Highness cannot be trusted when it comes to cooking?”

“Do you disagree?”

Keithwood shrugged. “You are right. But it seems our efforts to bide time have failed. Or perhaps, our efforts to do so have given them the time to be even more...”

“What a predicament... Should I hurry to the scene, or should we try to bide a little more time?”

If Letizia planned to wait for Sapphias’s arrival to begin the meal, there was a chance that rushing in would leave him immediately faced with some indescribable mushroom concoction. But if he hurried inside, there was still a chance he’d have the time to adjust their recipe.

“That’s it! I have an idea,” Sapphias said with a clap of his hands.

“An idea?”

“It’s simple. We sneak into the kitchen and check their progress.”

“But if we head to the entrance...”

There would certainly be servants waiting for Sapphias to rush him inside. Not only was he the lady of the house’s fiancé, he was heir to the title of Duke Bluemoon. It would be unthinkable to not greet him, but...

Sapphias lifted a hand to silence Keithwood. He chuckled. “I know. But you see, there’s a *secret* entrance.”

“A secret entrance?” Keithwood rubbed his chin with interest as Sapphias flashed him a lighthearted grin.

“Not to suddenly change the subject, but this statue is entitled, ‘The Hope of Tomorrow.’” Sapphias spoke casually as he approached the sculpture. “Quite honestly, I wondered why this strange, mushroom-shaped object received such a title, but...” He

put his hand on the sculpture. He moved a part of one of the twisting stalks to the right, and in the next moment, the sculpture slid aside with a groan. “You see, this is an underground passage leading out of the manor.”

“Ah, so the name comes from the fact that it’s an escape route that gives the Schuberts hope for tomorrow if their manor is ever attacked.”

“Exactly. Oh, but it wasn’t built to be an escape route. I hear it was originally a shortcut for magic performances.”

“For magic?”

“Yes. I hear the marquess of a few generations back was into illusions like disappearing to only later appear somewhere else. In any case, this mansion is quite elaborate in its design.” Sapphias stepped inside the underground passage with a bitter grin. It was dim inside, and despite being completely hidden from the outside, it had somehow been designed to let in aboveground light.

“Indeed. But how did you learn of this passage, Lord Sapphias?”

That question seemed to instill some panic in Sapphias. “Huh? Well, you know! I would, of course, never use it for something unseemly, but there are times you want to watch the stars or exchange poems with your lover, right? Or to sneak onto the rooftop to watch the moon as you lay on her knees, right?!” As if to embody how hard Sapphias was trying to convince him, his fists were clenched.

“If only Prince Sion could be so forward... Stop.” Suddenly, Keithwood froze and brought his pointer finger to his lips. “Sh...”

He carefully peered around the corner, and Sapphias followed in his footsteps. Fortunately, the path was dimly lit. While they weren’t completely concealed, it helped to keep them hidden.

They focused their eyes and found four shadows walking down the hallways. There was a young maid, a man...and two young girls. One of them was carried by the man and slumped over his shoulders. Once they had watched them turn the opposite corner, Keithwood whispered to Sapphias. “Who were they?”

“One was a maid of the Schuberts, but I don’t recognize the man. The other two seemed like kids, but...what is going on, exactly?” Sapphias was baffled.

Keithwood groaned. “Lord Sapphias, you should head for Princess Mia.” His face was stern. “These are criminals. They could even be Serpents. It’s impossible to know what danger could be

awaiting us if—”

“No. I’m coming with you.” He took a step forward.

“But…”

“They had some young children with them! I would never be able to show my face to Letizia again if I turned the other way.” Sapphias flashed a dashing grin. “As I said earlier, I know this passage well. It would be best if we stayed together.”

Quite honestly, Keithwood found Sapphias’s words heartening. He showed Sapphias a grin of his own. “Is that truly what you were thinking?”

“To be honest… I just don’t have the confidence to eat a mushroom stew prepared by Her Highness and my dear Letizia!” He had made his declaration! He looked even braver than he had just moments before! “Well, we may have failed at biding time, but we can trust Dario. I’m sure their cooking party will work itself out. At least, I think so. Hopefully…”

“You’re…right. I suppose such fortunate miracles really do happen. And after giving it some long, hard thought, Prince Sion really is a genius and a capable young man. He might be able to awaken to the dangers of their cooking just in time.” His words sounded more like a prayer.

Thus, the two surrendered themselves to wishful thinking and instead decided to risk their lives in the underground passage.

Chapter 41: When Traps Are Likely to Succeed

"Now that I think about it, aren't there *too* many vegetables?" Once they (or really, Tiona at lightning-fast speeds) had cut half the vegetables on the table, Mia began to have some doubts. Just how big of a pot would they need to use all the ingredients that filled the table?

Dario took a step forward to wipe away her doubts. "It's to ensure you can eat the best dish possible." Obviously, Dario wasn't going to tell her he was trying to waste their time. He was a capable young man, after all. "Out of all the ingredients we gathered, we're only going to use those that have been chopped the best. We can only offer the best dish possible to you, Your Highness."

They were typical words from a noble, but Mia gave him a sharp glare. "I...see. So that's how it is." Mia placed her knife on the table.

"Huh? Your Highness?" Dario watched her curiously.

Mia spoke quietly. "Dario, I want you to remember this: wasting food is something I absolutely will not tolerate." Her tone was stern. "Here in Tearmoon, we have a terrible custom of belittling those who till the land and farm our produce. That mindset is wrong."

There were once nobles who chuckled in glee when welcomed to the neighboring nation of Perujin with a road paved with wheat. To Mia, they were incredibly foolish. While Dario's actions were not so extreme, Mia sensed that they were rooted in the same line of thinking.

"I will not stand food being wasted. It would be impossible for us to eat all of this, right? In that case, I believe it's time we lay down our knives."

Even if they had done a poor job—even if they had some oddly shaped pieces and skin mixed in—they had already prepared all the vegetables they needed to fill the pot. Mia's argument was both

sound and firm, and thus, it threw Dario into a bit of a panic.

"No, but..."

"You truly are as wonderful as they say, Your Highness." Dario was lost for words, but Gerta stepped in to offer her own, clapping in admiration. "Your heart is as pure as the Holy Lady's. I am truly impressed."

"Oho! I don't think I deserve so much praise." Still, she stuck out her chest with a haughty laugh and a smug grin...but then, she thought against it. *Wait a second! This isn't good. My goal today is to get close to Letizia! I can't let myself get carried away!*

In a flash, the seriousness returned to Mia's face. She hoped no one had caught sight of her earlier smugness.

Seeing Mia's quick change in expression, Gerta couldn't help but inwardly chuckle. *Like I thought, she may be the Great Sage of the Empire, but she's still just a girl. She doesn't know how to keep a poker face.*

She had been pretending to be pleased by Gerta's praise, but she had faltered at the end. Mia had revealed her calm focus, and Gerta watched her with a grin. *So, she* has *noticed that us Chaos Serpents have sneaked our way into the Schuberts' residence. She simply came here to confirm her suspicions.* Gerta had realized Citrina's escape, as well as the two others who had disappeared. *They're almost certainly here just to search the manor. I need to watch out for that traitorous Yellowmoon, but I'm not too certain about the others. I do hear they're students of Saint-Noel Academy's Special Elementary Education Course, but...*

Gerta took a deep breath. *I see they've begun to train specialists to fight against us Serpents at Saint-Noel's. They must have been educated by the Great Sage herself.* An electric shock ran through her body. In the world she built inside her head, Mia had four more spies working for her almost as capable as Citrina, and one wasn't even ten years old!

How frightening. Luckily, nothing should come up even if they search the rooms in the manor. Both the poison and antidote Gerta had received from Kunlou were on her person, and obviously, the plan and its details to kidnap Letizia hadn't been written down anywhere. Plus, her two allies weren't in the manor, but in the passages below. There was no evidence they could find to confirm she was a Serpent.

Still, it is the Great Sage of the Empire I'm up against. I cannot let my guard down. Killing her while I have the chance truly is the right move. Luckily, Prince Sion, Prince Abel, and even Tiona Rudolvon were present...and importantly, Sapphias was not. If she could frame Sapphias as the culprit and ruin the relationship between Tearmoon and Sunkland, she'd be able to plunge the world into chaos once again.

That left only one course of action. Gerta forced a smile and observed her surroundings. Dario was the one watching the pot, most likely partly to prevent Mia or his sister from being able to mess with it. Gerta silently approached him.

"Young Master Dario, why don't you join the others?"

"But..."

"There is no need to worry. I shall watch the pot." Her smile never faltered as she continued. "Isn't this a good opportunity to deepen your relationship with Prince Sion? I believe doing so is a role Lord Sapphias expects of you." By implying that Dario needed to place importance on his relationship with Sunkland as heir to the Schuberts, Gerta led him astray.

Dario was torn for a moment, but eventually, he nodded and left. Gerta thought nothing of how easily he had trusted her words, as trust was something built over years. Faith forged over a decade or two made your words persuasive and more powerful. It was a Chaos Serpent tenet, and thus, Gerta knew this well.

In that case, it's Princess Mia and Prince Sion I need to be most wary of, though I do hear that Abel Remno isn't someone to underestimate either.

The moment all in the room were turned the other way, Gerta pretended to season the dish as she dumped the bottle of poison in, and the moment that powder dissolved into the stew, Citrina and the others returned.

Just by the skin of my teeth. She inwardly chuckled. *If she were here, I may have been caught.*

Gerta kept her satisfied grin inside as she stirred the pot. Then, she focused her energy on diverting the others' eyes from both the pot and herself.

I need to be most careful of Citrina Etoile Yellowmoon. She had introduced the poison perfectly; none had seen her. All that was left for Gerta was to be the one to taste the dish, and with that, the Great Sage would be dead. It was all the Chaos Serpents in

Tearmoon had ever hoped for, and thus, she couldn't help her smile from creeping onto her face.

But Gerta had forgotten a vital Serpent teaching, the basic tenet that, "it is easiest to fall into a trap yourself when you are trying to trap others." She had no idea what Mia Luna Tearmoon had in store for her.

Chapter 42: A Clash of Vice and Virtue!

So, what was Mia, the Great Sage, up to while Gerta was poisoning their food and standing on watch to make sure nobody noticed? After reuniting with Citrina, she was fully focused of course! Fully focused on causing a disaster.

"Rina's back." After Citrina delivered that message to Mia, the two stepped out into the hallway for Mia to retrieve the trixy caps.

"My! They're wonderful..." Mia spent a moment marveling at them before returning her sights to the kitchen. There, she found Gerta intently watching their stew. "Hm, I suppose she's worried about how it will turn out. She's just staring at it."

Mia recalled that the chef at the Whitemoon Palace had once told her that keeping the proper heat was essential in making a delicious dish. *She's working so hard just to ensure that we have a tasty meal to eat!* Mia was deeply moved, but then, she furrowed her brow. "But...this is quite the problem. I won't be able to add the mushrooms. Is there something else I can do...? That's it!" She reached an answer immediately. "If I can't add them to the pot, I simply need to add them to the bowls!"

Mia wasn't completely ignorant when it came to cooking. She was deeply interested, and so, she watched her cooks. Some say that as a result, she learned cursory knowledge that only proved a greater threat to her and others, but anyways...

Mia knew that some dishes could be prepared by adding herbs to the bowl and pouring hot soup over them. So couldn't she do the same with the mushrooms? The Great Sage had revealed her resourcefulness to the world!

It's not just important to stick to the basics, but to adapt them to fit your needs! Isn't that the true joy of cooking? Had such a thought reached Keithwood's ears, he'd probably have collapsed while foaming at the mouth.

"Rina, do you think it would be fine to first add these

mushrooms to the bowls and pour the stew over it?"

Mia was worried they wouldn't have as much taste that way, but Citrina opened her eyes wide and said, "So that's how you plan to use them... That should be fine. They should still be effective that way." She nodded with a gulp.

"That's good to hear!" Mushrooms truly reigned supreme; they were still tasty even when added right at the end. Mia took a moment to marvel at the ultimate ingredient that was mushrooms before turning her thoughts to the stew she'd soon be devouring. She had to gulp her drool back into her mouth.

Just as Mia, Citrina, Bel, and Kiryl had finished cutting up the mushrooms and adding them to the bowls...

"The stew is ready, everyone." Gerta had made her announcement.

Mia and the others approached the pot.

"With your permission, I'd like to take a taste," said Gerta.

"A taste?" Mia asked.

"Yes. I'll also be checking for the unlikely chance that the dish has been poisoned. I would like to take the utmost care in ensuring nothing happens to you."

This explanation earned a groan from Mia. *I get it... She's quite cunning despite those looks!*

Mia's thinking was thus: Gerta was just dying to get a taste of the stew. It was certainly a culinary marvel, and she wanted a bite for herself. Mia greatly identified with her interest in the gourmet, and thus, she thought it best to let Gerta have her wish.

"Then, if you will..." Gerta went to transfer some of the stew's contents into a small bowl, but she was interrupted.

"Wait just a moment, Gerta. That wouldn't make for a proper taste test." With that, Mia brought one of the bowls she had prepared earlier over to the pot. It was already properly adorned with mushrooms.

The stew isn't complete without mushrooms!

It was under Gerta's guidance that they were able to bring this stew to its completion. Mia wanted to show her the proper appreciation for her efforts. She poured the vegetable stew over the beautifully diced trixy caps and made sure they were fully covered. But there was something that bothered Mia.

"Hm..." The mushrooms were all stuck at the bowl's bottom

with the other vegetables piled on top. *If she's only doing a taste test, she won't be eating the entire bowl, and if that's the case, she might not make it to the mushrooms...*

It would be a tragedy for Gerta to miss out on these tasty mushrooms. Luckily, Mia was magnanimous, and so, she made sure that wouldn't be the case. *I just need to make sure there's only mushrooms and broth in her bite and keep the vegetables out!*

Thus, Mia's ultimate vegetable soup—or really, mushroom soup with vegetable broth—was complete. With a grin, she carefully offered the bowl to Gerta. "Well then, eat up!"

Chapter 43: Just Like a Magic Trick...

Patty and Yanna had been brought to an underground room. At first, Patty had tried to memorize their route, but after twisting hallways and multiple flights up and down stairs, she quickly gave up on that.

I don't think I'd be able to run even if I abandoned Yanna. With that realization, Patty felt relieved. Of course, she couldn't die here, but leaving Yanna to die wouldn't secure her survival. Thus, she didn't have to do that, and this realization was her salvation.

"Well now, let's have a nice, long chat..."

The entrance to the room was covered with iron bars, making it look like a prison cell. The man dropped Yanna on the floor near the entrance and the shock caused her to awaken with a groan. She looked around the room before sucking in a breath. What lay in front of them was enough to frighten someone even as strong-minded and gutsy as Yanna.

Along the wall was something that looked like a coffin filled with sharp spikes. Chains affixed with shackles hung from the wall as if begging to lock someone up. There were whips with sharp ends and metal clubs with spikey balls at the end. It was chilling, and Yanna's reaction was natural for anyone who was imagining what their assailants planned to do by bringing them to such a place.

"Oh my!" said the maid with a giggle. "Did these tools catch your eye?" She must have noticed Patty looking at the instruments. She showed them a sadistic grin that seemed to cling to the skin. To Patty, it looked fake, as if she were simply trying to scare them—or perhaps, it was calculating, as if she knew being in such a room would make questioning go smoother. Patty recalled Gerta's forced, emotionless grin and wondered if this maid's was the same.

Patty resolved to remain expressionless, thinking it could benefit her. Seeing her lack of reaction, the maid dropped her grin and disinterestedly whispered in her ear. "I see this method doesn't work on children trained by the Serpents. It's just as Master Gerta said. They've educated you. Hm? Did it work on the one over

there?" The maid watched Yanna's pale, trembling expression with a cruel grin and walked over to the device that resembled a coffin. "You're looking at this, right? Look at these spikes. They're so red... What do you think they're used for?"

Without breaking her grin, the maid slammed her hand into the spikes. Yanna let out a shriek, and even Patty was so shocked she jumped. Still, the maid's face remained calm, and she was even grinning.

"The answer"—she extended the palm of her hand, which was spotless—"is that it's for magic tricks. See? It won't hurt you. Everything here is just for show. Even the passage we traveled was built just for magic tricks. Are you shocked?"

The maid spoke her words gracefully, but her expression quickly became ponderous. "To tell the truth, I wanted to practice my skills and see how much information I could get out of you on lies alone, but it seems like we're wanting for time. Plus..." She gave a suspicious glance to Patty. "You've been trained by the Serpents, so I need to figure out your identity with haste. Not only did you recognize Master Gerta, you reacted to the mention of House Clausius. Master Gerta is dying to figure out just who and what you are, so I'll be using some more...*violent*...methods." Her grin remained kind. "Oh, but don't worry. It won't hurt, and it won't be scary or painful either."

She pulled out something that looked like a hard candy from her pocket. "You see, this is medicine that forces you to tell the truth. You'll be silly for the next seven days, but don't worry, it will all be over once you've regained your senses." Her tone was that of someone trying to soothe a child.

"Well, isn't that frightening!" A voice suddenly rang throughout the room. Shocked, all of them looked around before finally resting their eyes on a figure standing on the other side of the iron bars, who flashed a bitter grin and shrugged. "I'm sure it's intolerable for those who have to drink it." The figure was none other than Sapphias, the exact man Mia had been considering force-feeding this medicine to just a little while earlier! Thank goodness he had escaped such a fate.

"You're Sapphias Etoile Bluemoon!" The maid put up her defenses and glared at the man.

"You're quite ill-mannered for a maid," came Sapphias's response. He hit her with the most powerful words he had as an

eminent noble and put on a deprecating grin. “Well, I suppose kidnappers aren’t known for their manners.” He turned to the man standing behind the maid. “You! I suppose you are involved in this plot. Hm... You seem to resemble one of the Schuberts’ servants. I suppose you took his appearance for your scheme?”

Faced with Sapphias’s gaze, the thin man recoiled with a groan.

“In any case, you lot aren’t fit to serve Letizia and her family. I’ll be getting rid of you.”

“Ha ha! Bold words for a coward like you, Sapphias. How’s a spoiled noble brat who’s never so much as swung a sword going to stop a cunning man like me?” The man grinned.

The maid spoke as well. “You didn’t think that firing us would make us subservient, did you? Or that boasting of your noble blood would make us afraid?”

Behind the maid, the man unsheathed his knife, which shone with a threatening glint. However, Sapphias didn’t panic, unlike the hurled epithet of “coward” would suggest.

“I have no need for your subservience, though perhaps there’s a need for you to be vexed. You’ve fallen right into my trap.”

“Huh?”

The bottom fell out of the iron coffin with a clang. A thin, agile shadow jumped out, and they rushed toward the armed man like the wind, bringing his right leg into the air. His leg bent like a whip and kicked the knife right out of the man’s hand. The shadow then turned around in a single motion, now slamming their left leg into the man’s chest. He was frozen in shock.

Making sure the man had hit the wall, the shadow stuck out their hand. His knife fell right into it, just like a magic trick.

“I was worried that the blade may have been poisoned, but I see my fears were unfounded,” said Keithwood as he touched the blade. He shrugged and put on a sarcastic grin.

“H-Huh?! Where did you—?!” The maid hurried to retreat.

Sapphias simply watched her with a haughty grin. “From a hidden doorway, of course! You said so yourself. This place is a storage room for magic props!” he exclaimed with a playful wink.

Chapter 44: Tragedy at the Fun-Filled Cooking Party!

Tragedy had struck!

After safely retrieving the children from the basement, Keithwood and Sapphias hurried to the kitchen. Sapphias led the way, and after bolting up the stairs and to the kitchen with labored breaths...the crime had already occurred.

"Wh-What happened here?" The scene before them had Sapphias holding his breath. Mia stood in the center of the room, trembling with a face as white as a sheet. She was looking at the old maid, Gerta, who was collapsed on the floor and twitching. "J-Just what is this...?" he whispered, but he knew well who the culprit was: Princess Mia. Just what, exactly, had gone down? Well, he had a pretty good idea of that too, but just in case, let us turn back the clock.

"Well then, eat up!" said Mia, handing over the bowl with a gleeful grin.

Gerta cursed under her breath. *Damn you, Great Sage! Just what have you planned?* Hidden by her usual plastered-on smile, she began to think in earnest. Just what were her foes after? She had already consumed the antidote. Well, rather than a proper antidote, it was simply another poison with effects that countered that of the one thrown in the pot. It wasn't immediately threatening to her, but she naturally wanted to dig into the stew as quickly as possible. The timing of this trick by the Great Sage had caused her to panic.

Just what has she schemed? Gerta stared not at the bowl, but at Mia's face. She had to have done something to the stew, but if she had poisoned it, Gerta wouldn't be able to tell based on sight alone. There was no way she'd put something inside the bowl that was obviously dangerous at a glimpse. Given her limited time, she needed to watch the Great Sage and take note of her every

movement and expression.

Gerta was a Serpent. In her youth, she had served as a maid for the Clausius family and familiarized herself with Serpent teachings. They were manipulators. She knew well how to read others to discern their emotions and desires, and she would use this greatest weapon of hers to defeat her mortal foe, the Great Sage of the Empire! This was the greatest battle of her life, and she would use the people-reading skills she had fostered her whole life—for decades—to their max and find what was in Mia's heart!

Yet—woefully *yet*—she couldn't read Mia. Her expression and movements revealed nothing but honest appreciation for the maid who had helped her. Gerta had been expecting to find malice, anger, or even a hint of cunning, but she could sense none of that.

Wh-What does this mean? How can this be true? She was running out of time. The poison from the antidote was beginning to spread through her body. Her panic had muddled her mind, but suddenly, she remembered exactly who she was dealing with, and exactly who Mia Luna Tearmoon was. She had forged a friendship with the Holy Lady Rafina, extended love to the people in the slums, built a hospital, and invited orphans to schools to learn. The core of this girl once called the Saint of Tearmoon and the Saint of Affection was nothing but pure good.

I don't get her at all. Gerta was about to burst into laughter, and it took all she had to hold it back. She opened her eyes and bit her lip. Depending on how you looked at it, she seemed to be expressing overwhelm at having been courteously served by the princess herself, but she was just trying to hold back her laughter. Deep inside, she was thinking, *How childish! To think the Great Sage was so foolish!* She wanted to shout with joy. *That traitorous Yellowmoon must have reported to her that she found nothing in my quarters, and so, the Great Sage decided to trust me.* Me*, who has earned the trust of the Schuberts over years of hard effort!*

Perhaps Mia had simply known that an old maid of House Clausius was here and wasn't certain that Gerta was with the Serpents. Information on the Clausius family was hard to come by, and when she looked back on it, Gerta was certain she had hid her tracks well. There was absolutely nothing that could raise suspicions at all.

The Great Sage was a force of pure good that chose to trust rather than doubt, and so, she had decided to trust Gerta…and once

Gerta realized that, she was sure she had won. This foe had bested many Serpents. She was their mortal enemy who had reduced the carefully laid plot to destroy Tearmoon carried out over centuries to nothing. And yet, that very Great Sage was now handing her food with a childish grin like Gerta was a friend. The sight brought Gerta immense relief.

Pft! I wonder what face she'll make when she realizes she was poisoned. Gerta couldn't wait. Now, she realized the hatred she held for the throne that stretched back even further than when Mia destroyed their plot; it was directed toward Mia's grandmother. *I went through all the trouble of raising her in the Clausius manor, instructing her in the ways of the Serpents, and training her to bring the emperor to the depths of despair…and yet she went against it all. How could I ever forgive her? No… That wasn't how it was…*

Her memories of the past were blurry and vague, but the disappointment of seeing her efforts come to naught had remained. Her mind focused on that resentment as she brought the vegetable broth to her lips. In the next moment, the taste of juicy vegetables spread over her tongue. There was the strong taste of nature's bounty, and the sweetness of the carrots, the bite of the fullmoon radishes, and the spiciness of the seasoning all made excellent accents. And were these things at the bottom with a bite to them…mushrooms?

For a moment, she wondered if she had really added them, but she dismissed it as one of the Schubert family's servants trying to accommodate the princess. She loved mushrooms, and they definitely added to the dish.

Tee hee! How odd. To think I'd be remembering the Clausius family after all this time. It's because that kid… That's right, that kid mentioned the Clausius family. Rather, she resembled Patricia. Gerta once again returned her sights to Mia, Patricia's granddaughter. *I wonder what face she'd make if she knew I had poisoned her granddaughter. Just thinking about it has me— Tee hee! No, we can't have that. I almost burst into laughter again! I can smile, but I can't laugh too hard or they'll grow suspicious of me. This vegetable stew really is delicious. I suppose it's a happy thing to die eating something so tasty. Ha ha ha! That's a funny thought. Pft!*

Was it really *that* funny? Did she really have to laugh *that* hard? But when she asked herself those questions, she found that act in and of itself so funny it only made things harder for her. This was

strange. Something was odd about this. She gritted her teeth and shook, tears forming in her eyes as she tried to hold back her laughter. Then suddenly, her vision blurred.

"G-Gerta? Are you okay?"

She heard Mia's worried voice, but her head looked so distorted she looked like a drawing a kid would make. It looked so strange it was hilarious, and now, Gerta couldn't hold back her laughter.

"Ha ha ha ha! Wh-What the heck?! Your face looks so funny! Ha ha ha!"

"Wh-What?!" Mia froze.

Huh?! Did she look at my face and laugh? How insolent! This is absolutely unforgivable! For a moment, Mia was furious, but...

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“There’s no need to get angry, Miss Mia. It’s just the mushrooms,” said Citrina. Mia turned to look at her. She once again turned to Gerta who was deep into a giggle fit. Then, she returned her gaze to Citrina. “I see you were unaware, but eating trixy caps causes uncontrollable laughter and paralysis.”

“Huh? What…?” Mia was at a loss for words. This was an absolute mess. *Th-This is terrible! Is this* my *fault?*

This was such a grave incident it could earn her the reputation as a selfish princess who force-fed another noble family’s veteran maid dubious mushrooms. Cold sweat began to flow down Mia’s back. Excuses began to twirl around her head like, *B-B-But Citrina said it was fine!* At the same time, she knew she was the culprit. Citrina had said so herself; the Yellowmoons don’t consider anything that can’t kill to be poison. Thus, Citrina must have assumed that Mia was trying to conduct dubious mushroom experiments on those beneath her. If Ludwig had been here, he would have stopped her, but Citrina was indebted to Mia, and given her familiarity with poisons, her warped logic might have led her to the conclusion that feeding people mushrooms with this level of poison was on the same level as a prank. She must have figured there was no need to stop Mia.

No, that can wait until later! The real problem here is that I poisoned one of the Schuberts’ maids with mushrooms and knocked her unconscious. The blood flushed from Mia’s face as she entered a panic. But then—at the exact worst timing—Keithwood rushed into the room. “Wh-What happened here?”

All were lost for words, so naturally, Mia tried to make some excuses, but someone else beat her to the punch.

“Damn you! Ha ha ha! Y-Your scheme has bested me, Great Sage of the—ha ha ha—Empire!”

“Huh?” Mia stared at her blankly.

Citrina was calm as she spoke. “There’s another effect in addition to uncontrollable laughter and paralysis. So that’s the effect you were after, Miss Mia.” Citrina crouched in front of Gerta. “You’re also unable to lie. You’re a Serpent, aren’t you?”

“You damn Yellowmoon brat! You backstabber! Aha ha ha ha!” Gerta’s laugh made it sound like she was having the time of her life.

Chapter 45: Time for Some Fun Questioning! Ha Ha Ha!

"Unbelievable... To think Gerta was a traitor." Gerta's sudden confession had Sapphias's face turning white. On the other hand, Letizia, Dario, and the other maids were completely unaware of what happened, and their bafflement was clear on their faces.

"She's really...?" asked Abel, his expression grim.

Citrina nodded. "She is." She began to search Gerta's pockets and soon found two vials near her breast. "So, she did have these." Citrina shook the two vials in front of Gerta. "Is this poison and its antidote?"

Gerta choked out, "It is!" between giggles. There was something quite...jovial...about this interrogation.

"She most likely tried to prove there was no poison in the stew by first drinking the antidote and then trying the stew for herself." Citrina crossed her arms and put her hand to her chin. "But, hm... This would require someone well-versed in poisons to pull off. Perhaps..."

The blood flushed from Sion's face. "You don't mean the same man who gave Echard his poison, do you?"

Citrina simply nodded before once again crouching down next to Gerta. "Who gave you these vials?"

"Aha ha ha! Wh-What do you mean, who?"

"A fellow Serpent. It was a man from the Fire Clan of the Equestrian Kingdom, right?"

"Bwa ha ha! It was! Ha ha ha! That's exactly right!"

Not only was this interrogation going down smoothly, but it seemed incredibly fun! As Mia watched the scene with deep interest from a short way away, her interest in the mushrooms only grew.

"That's right. We retrieved these two from the basement." Mia looked over to Sapphias to find Patty and Yanna.

"Hm? From the basement?" Mia tilted her head, so Keithwood provided a brief explanation.

“My, Sapphias! You were involved in something so dangerous?” Letizia went pale, but Sapphias simply laughed and shook his head.

“It’s nothing, my sweet! Compared to one of Princess Mia’s cooking parties, the danger is—”

“Lord Sapphias, your true feelings are coming out,” whispered Keithwood into Sapphias’s ear.

For a moment, Sapphias looked shocked, but he quickly cleared his throat and adjusted his words. “Compared to *protecting* one of Princess Mia’s cooking parties, the danger is insignificant. Not to mention that I could never look the other way when children are being kidnapped as a noble of Tearmoon. Right, Keithwood?”

“Of course. Naturally, we would never do something so unjust,” he said with a firm nod. Dario gave these two men an apathetic stare, but anyway...

“Are either of you hurt, Patty? Yanna?” Mia was just making sure, but while they nodded, their sullen expression revealed they had received quite the shock. Patty especially had her eyes trained to the ground and refused to even look at Mia. *Hm, something terrible must have happened to them. If I don’t do something about this, Patty’s going to close off her heart even further.*

“But what were Gerta and the others in the basement attempting? It doesn’t appear that they’ve infiltrated knowing that Her Highness would be visiting for this party...” said Sapphias, unsure what to make of the situation.

It was Citrina who answered. “Rina believes the Serpents were probably trying to take Letizia hostage to frame you as the leader of a coup, Sapphias.”

“What? *I?* Leader of a *coup*?! And Letizia, a hostage! How...” Sapphias was at a loss for words, but after a moment, sorrow filled his face as he spoke once again. “I see. It’s true. If Letizia were hostage, I may have revolted against Princess Mia. You’re more important to me than anything else in the whole world, after all.”

“My, Sapphias! You’re so sweet!”

Let’s just leave those two lovebirds alone.

Citrina crossed her arms and began to mutter. “House Yellowmoon once considered using such a plot, and since the Serpents picked the perfect target, Rina believes that has to have been their aim.”

Sapphias’s cheek twitched upon hearing himself be called the “perfect target.”

“Oh, um… It’s not your character, but your circumstances, so please don’t let it get to you,” she added with a sweet smile. She was as crafty as always.

“I see. Sapphias is Duke Bluemoon’s heir. A conflict between us would definitely lead to chaos. It seems like just the kind of thing the Serpents would think up.”

The ones most opposed to the revolution Mia was trying to lead was the central nobility who were led by the Bluemoons. If Mia’s relationship with the family fell through, Tearmoon could be split in half, and if the chaos it caused halted the supply of provisions, there could be famine, pestilence…and guillotines!

Mia shivered and tried to direct her thoughts elsewhere. No one could withstand only imagining the terrible; you had to think of fun things too. Thus, Mia decided to ask Citrina what had been on her mind. “By the way, Rina. She seems to be quite enjoying herself. Is that what happens when you eat those mushrooms?”

“Yes. So you didn’t know their effects?” Citrina clearly found this strange.

Mia gave a solemn nod. “Yes, well… It’s impossible to know everything, even me.”

In actuality, Mia knew almost nothing, but anyways…

“Eating trixy caps induces uncontrollable laughter, just like you see in Gerta. While you laugh for a while, it’s quite painful. You spend seven days as if your soul has left your body.”

“I see… How interesting!” Mia joyfully began to laugh. Keithwood and Sapphias, on the other hand, scowled.

Chapter 46: The Attentive Mia's Consideration

"And where are the rest of your Serpent conspirators?" asked Mia.

"Th-They're no longer—ha ha—in this country! Pfft, how unfortunate for you, Great Sage."

"Really?" Mia glanced over at Citrina, who nodded.

"It is nearly impossible for Gerta to lie right now."

Mia folded her arms with a grunt as Sion spoke up. "He left her with the poison and ran so he'd be far away by the time the incident occurred. It's quite similar to what happened with Echard... What was the name of the man who gave you the poison, and what did he look like?"

"Aha! H-His name was Ka Kunlou, a poison master of the Fire Clan. A-And, aha ha ha! Th-There was an olden Serpent from the Visalians with him too! Aha ha ha ha!"

"A Visalian?" Mia couldn't help but glance at Yanna, who fearfully shivered in response. "My apologies, Yanna. I wasn't trying to blame you. I shouldn't have done that." Mia patted her head in an attempt to calm her down. "Even if our enemies are Visalians, that doesn't mean they have anything to do with you." She made sure to tack on some extra assurances as well. "I suppose we should ask Aima about Ka Kunlou, and I'm quite interested in this Visalian man as well..."

"It may be best to assume this is the same person who helped Barbara enter Saint-Noel's," muttered Abel with a scowl.

"Yes... We really do have much to consider."

Eventually, Gerta was taken away by the Princess Guard, who continued their interrogation inside a room in the Schuberts' manor.

"Miss Mia, Rina would like to go too, just in case." Even if it wasn't life-threatening, Gerta had still consumed some poisonous

mushrooms. They had plenty of things left to ask her, and on the off chance she died, there was a chance "The Story of a Reincarnated Serpent Starting at the Poisonous Mushrooms!" was about to begin. In other words, Mia was thankful for Citrina's offer.

"Oh, but if that's the case, will you accompany her too, Bel?"

"Huh? You want me to go too?" Bel couldn't figure out why Mia had made such a suggestion.

"I want you to learn all about those mushrooms with Rina. You need to know exactly how terrifying poisonous mushrooms can be, as mushrooms are a fascinating creature that can bring great pain to novices who try to master them..." Those words were an incredibly wise display from Mia, but unfortunately, she considered herself a mushroom expert and thus, not someone that advice applied to.

"I see! I'll be sure to do so." Bel gave a brave, princess-like nod. "Let's go, Rina!"

With that, Bel led Citrina, who was a daughter of one of the Four Dukes, out of the kitchen. Mia watched her gallant and trustworthy frame and was overcome with faith in the future of the empire. Wait, gallant? Trustworthy? She wasn't any of those things, but anyways...

"Still, I'm quite surprised to see you go on the offensive, Mia. She may be an enemy, but I would have never expected you to feed her poisonous mushrooms," said Sion, a tint of shock on his face. "I suppose you were unable to quell your anger at Sapphias being implicated in such a plot. Well, if I knew the same man who tried to ruin Echard was involved, I'm sure I would have taken such drastic measures myself."

Sion's summation had Mia's mouth agape. "Ah, yes. That's exactly how it was, mostly." With that proclamation, she gave a solemn nod, folded her arms, and emanated an aura that screamed, "Yup! All according to my plan!" Then she noticed Keithwood. "My, is something wrong?"

"N-No. I suppose you are correct. Yes, let's just go with that." Keithwood didn't quite seem happy with her explanation, but he tried to force himself to believe her words.

"So it was anger for Sapphias's sake that led you to use such mushrooms..." Letizia clasped her hands to her chest as water pooled in her eyes. Letizia was deeply in love with Sapphias, and when he was involved, she was prone to lose up to fifty intelligence points.

Mia took her hand in hers. “Yes. That was actually why I came here today...” Mia was a veteran waverider, and her aurelia form wasn’t about to let even the smallest wave escape her. “Recently, I received word that Sapphias would soon stage a coup. Of course, I have the utmost faith in Sapphias, but it still nipped at my heart.”

Falsehoods brazenly fell from Mia’s lips! But in this situation, she felt little guilt, as she had erased her doubts in Sapphias as soon as she began to conspire to grow close with Letizia. It may have come at the very last moment she’d be able to proclaim that she had trusted him all along, but at the very least, Mia had the *confidence* to proclaim that she had always had faith in him.

Thus, Mia made her declaration proudly. “Sapphias is incredibly important to me. I came here because I knew that anything happening to him would be a disaster for all of us, though I wasn’t expecting Serpents to be hiding here.”

“You have my deepest apologies, Your Highness. A maid of our house should have never been able to...” Letizia trailed off, her face growing as pale as a ghost’s.

Mia addressed her jovially. “There is no need to apologize. The Serpents hide everywhere. They may be quite frightening, but none of this is your fault.”

“Yes, but...”

Just as tension began to fill the air, a voice spoke up. “Yanna, I’m hungry...”

Kiryl’s childish request for Yanna’s attention had the tension dissipating in an instant.

“That’s right! I had almost forgotten.” Mia clapped her hands and looked at their vegetable stew. “We haven’t eaten yet! We do have the stew we all worked so hard to make, but...” Since they had the antidote at hand, they may be able to nullify the poison by chucking it into the pot too. “We can’t eat food that has been poisoned. It may be a waste, but let’s throw the stew away and make something else.” Mia spoke such words *incredibly* casually. “Bel, Rina, Kiryl, Patty, and even Yanna didn’t get to participate the first time, and I believe neither Keithwood nor Sapphias were able to participate either.”

Mia was an attentive woman who always made sure to show proper consideration to those around her.

“No, no, no. Wait a moment, Your Highness. D-Didn’t you use all the ingredients already?” Panicked, Sapphias tried to step in to

stop her.

Mia flashed him a sweet smile and giggled. “That won’t be a problem. Look!” On the other side of Mia’s pointed finger was a mountain of vegetables. “We have plenty of ingredients left, and vegetables aren’t exactly known for their long shelf lives. Now that we’ve solved the issue at hand, let’s get back to—”

“N-No! After all that’s transpired, cooking doesn’t seem quite right.” Keithwood sent in some reinforcements!

“It’s exactly *because* of all that’s transpired that we should cook.” Mia’s face was serious. Yanna stood nearby, and she patted her on the head. “I’m sorry, Yanna. I put you through a frightening situation, didn’t I?”

“Oh, n-no, um…” Mia’s sudden display of affection had Yanna’s cheeks turning crimson.

Mia showed her a kind grin. “I don’t want this to be the last thing the children remember from today. I want them to instead have fun memories of cooking alongside their friends.”

Keithwood groaned. He was at a loss for words. Mia’s argument was sound, and so, he had no rebuttal. It would truly be pitiful to let the terrifying memories of the underground passage be what the children took away from today, and allowing that to happen wasn’t befitting of a vassal to Sion.

Sapphias was equally at a loss for a counterargument, and glancing at his dear Letizia, he could tell she was raring to get back to cooking, as she whispered, “I need to work extra hard for Sapphias since he missed out the first time!” and rolled up her sleeves. Not to mention, it was hard to share any rebuttal if this was all for the children.

In a last-ditch effort, the two men glanced at their final stronghold, Dario. But he was nowhere to be found!

“Huh? Where’s Dario?”

“I’m sorry, Sapphias. What happened with Gerta was such a shock for him. He wants some time alone in his room to think.” These words from Letizia left Sapphias with a conviction: *I see you have run, dear brother-in-law!*

“How dare you! To think you would be as pitiful as to run, Dario!” said Sapphias as he conveniently chucked his memories from just moments earlier over the event horizon of his recollection.

Chapter 47: The Serpent's Curse and the Fallen Marquess

Once their fun-filled cooking party had concluded, Citrina returned with an announcement; based on Gerta's statements, it was all but certain that she, another young maid working for the Schuberts, and another man had been plotting to kidnap Letizia.

"And they planned to use that to force Sapphias to stage a coup. How despicable," muttered Mia as she glanced at Sapphias. He was slumped over, clearly in shock, and for some odd reason, Keithwood was slumped over as well! What could possibly be the reason? This puzzled Mia, but she quickly turned her eyes back to Citrina. "You did exceptionally, Rina."

The praise earned her one of Citrina's usual sweet smiles. "Thank you. Bel was with me, so I wanted to do my best." For some reason, she was wiggling her fingers, and behind her, Bel was grimacing.

"Moons, how did you... No!" Mia had figured them out. "You tickled it out of her?! The mushrooms were already making it so hard for her not to laugh!" Mia gulped. An uproarious air began to fill the room, but Citrina shook her head with a regrettable frown.

"Tickle her? Rina would never do something so vulgar. People simply become ticklish as soon as they think they're about to be tickled. As soon as I showed her this, it was over," she said with a giggle, a grin, and a wiggle of her fingers.

"Rina was brutal! She's really good at tickling in the future, so I always make sure I never do anything that will make her angry!" said Bel, sounding like she was still willing to do anything that was one step removed from that. At least they were getting along.

"Rina thinks we've gotten what we need to out of Gerta, but would you like to question her yourself, Miss Mia?"

"Hm..." To be honest, Mia wasn't too interested in interrogations, but that didn't mean she wasn't interested in the effects of those mushrooms!

Well, I do wonder what they taste like. I suppose I really should talk to her myself! With that in mind, Mia began to pick who would accompany her. If she revealed she was just interested in the mushrooms, the others would probably step in to stop her. She needed to be careful about who she picked, and she looked around the room in search of the perfect person.

"Um, Miss Mia?" Suddenly, Mia felt someone pulling at the hem of her dress. She looked down to find Patty, who was staring straight back at her. "Could you please take me with you to question Gerta—I mean, that maid?"

"Huh?" Mia looked back at Patty in shock. She could see determination in Patty's face, and Mia wasn't certain what to make of it. *It's rare for Patty to make such a request herself.* Mia took a minute to ponder things over. She had yet to reveal Patty's secret to anyone, so just in case...

"In that case, Patty and I shall go speak with her. I take it she's still paralyzed, Rina?"

"She'll be able to neither lie nor move, the perfect circumstances for questioning."

Mia nodded before turning her gaze back to the others. "In that case, could Abel, Sion, and Sapphias question the other two?"

Having quickly assigned roles, Mia left the kitchen.

Gerta had been brought to a room in the Schuberts' residence, and the old maid had her hands tied behind her back for assurances. She was forced to sit in a chair and seemed a bit slumped over, most likely because Citrina's harsh questioning had zapped her of her energy.

Gerta looked at Mia and grinned. "My, if it isn't the Great Sage of the Empire. Such poor taste, to come and laugh at my defeat. Aha ha ha!"

"You're the only one who's laughing..." It was a rare instance of Mia landing a joke. She crouched down in front of Gerta and gestured for Patty to sit down next to her. *Where should I start? I suppose I don't know what Patty wants to ask either.* She glanced over at Patty, but that was when Gerta started talking.

"I would have never expected you to investigate House Clausius so long after their demise. I suppose that girl was sent by Empress Patricia to instigate this. To think that brat would interfere with us even from beyond the grave."

Her words left Mia dumbfounded. “You know about House Clausius and Patty—rather, Grandmother Patricia? Then you must know my grandmother.” As soon as those words left her mouth, Mia realized *Huh? Does that mean Patty knows Gerta too?* Mia glanced at Patty, but she was as expressionless as always.

“Aha ha ha! There’s no need to feign ignorance! You already know—ah ha ha—that I worked for House Clausius, don’t you? Drop the act. Ha ha ha! There’s no need to pretend you’re surprised,” spat Gerta. “As you must already be aware, I was the one who raised Patricia. Bwah ha ha ha! B-But even though I trained her well as a Serpent, she betrayed us. What an ungrateful child to the house who raised her. Aha ha ha!”

“What exactly is House Clausius?” Mia decided to ask a question which had long been on her mind.

Gerta scowled. “How regrettable! To think that the princess of the throne is ignorant of that question’s answer and has forgotten the first emperor’s aim! It’s truly, pfft, deplorable!” She shook her head in disbelief. “House Clausius existed as a measure for this very situation, but thanks to that ungrateful brat—”

“Um, to go back to my question, what exactly is ‘this very situation’?”

“There’s no need to explain. Bwah ha ha ha! You already know of the traitorous Yellowmoons, yes? House Clausius is a similar noble house meant to carry out the first emperor’s brilliant plan! Ha ha! While the Yellowmoons strove to realize His Majesty’s dream through assassinations, House Clausius existed as a fail-safe should the throne ever grow corrupt.”

“Corrupt?”

“I’m talking about those like you, Mia Luna Tearmoon! Tee hee hee! The Great Sage of the Empire! Ha ha ha!” said Gerta as she glared Mia down. The fact that her mouth alone was grinning only made her creepier. “People are weak. Ambitions for destruction can dissipate, especially in those at the top like emperors. They grow satisfied and complacent in their circumstances. House Clausius was meant to thrust the emperor into despair and keep his heart close to that of the first emperor’s.”

“And Grandmother Patricia was trained to do so?”

“Yes... That backstabber was the daughter of a destitute mistress, but we turned her into an empress! Yet she betrayed us! Aha ha ha! Her treachery was unforgivable! That’s why...” Gerta

twisted her lips into a grin. “That’s why we took revenge. Her brother Hannes Clausius received the Serpent’s curse.”

“The Serpent’s curse? What’s that?” Mia’s voice trembled, but that was only because the word “curse” had scared her. Anyways...

“Hannes was head of House Clausius. He was simply a hostage meant to manipulate Empress Patricia, but unlike his elder sister, he had promise. He read through *The Book of Those who Crawl the Earth* every day without fail, even going so far as to study related texts. It was as if he had been possessed by the Serpents... Pfft!” Gerta dramatically cut off her words. “But one day, tee hee, Hannes suddenly disappeared. He may have been killed by a Serpent angry at the actions of the empress, or maybe he had been kidnapped. In any case, he was not someone who could live without the Serpents. I’m sure he’s dead. Aha ha ha! How good that feels!” She laughed some more, and it was clear this laughter was genuine.

Patty spoke up with a trembling voice. “A-Are you really Gerta?” Her expression was twisted in confusion, and it caused Gerta to scowl.

“Ah, those eyes. You really do resemble that useless Patricia. Aha ha ha! Could you be her reincarnation? If so, I hope you are cursed! Not just you, but the Great Sage! The empire!” The cadence of her voice made her sound drunk as she fell into another laughing fit. Watching her, Mia couldn’t help but shiver.

Once they had left the room, Mia turned to watch Patty. She was silent, and her eyes were trained on the floor.

“Um, Patty?” After all that had transpired, Mia concluded she needed to explain, but what should she say? How would she cover her tracks? But as Mia pondered this over, she suddenly heard a whisper.

“Let me see Hannes...” Her face shot upward. “Where is he? Where’s Hannes? I want to see him! I need to see him now...” Patty was gripping the hem of her skirt as tears trickled down her cheeks, yet her face remained expressionless as if someone had banned her from doing so.

No, that wasn’t true. It wasn’t “as if”; she really had been banned. The Serpents had trained her to kill her emotions and use her expressions to lead others astray.

“Patty...” There was nothing Mia could say to her.

“I miss Hannes...”

All she could do was listen to her choked words.

Side Story: The Final Clair De Lune — A Redmoon and Bluemoon Tea Party—

It was a scene from a vanished history, a story from a world where imperial princess Miabel survived and became the last Tearmoon princess, and where Mia was so satisfied with her happy family, she decided there was no need to become Tearmoon's first empress.

A few years had passed since the seat of emperor became empty. The fight over who would claim the crown had grown fierce, eventually leading to the worst-case scenario: clashes between the private armies of noble households. Those nominated to be the next ruler were those who hailed from the families of the Four Dukes, the Etoilers. The blood of the imperial family ran through their veins, and the houses split into pairs of two, leading the nobles under them in a battle for dominance.

On one side was the Teal faction, an alliance between the Bluemoons who had the support of the central nobility and the Greenmoons who had strong foreign connections. On the other was the Ochre faction, an alliance between the Redmoons who held strong military sway and the Yellowmoons who were the weakest of the Four Dukes. The two sides dedicated themselves to a bloody feud against their own kin.

Meanwhile, the daughter of the emperor, Mia Luna Tearmoon, had originally resigned herself to be an observer of the feud. But now, she had responded to her vassals' calls for her to declare her intention of taking the throne in order to avoid splitting her country. But just before she could make that declaration public—right during a banquet meant to kick-off her campaign—Mia had been assassinated by poison. In the short time following after, Mia's children left this world one by one, leaving only two who carried her blood behind: the missing third princess Patricianne and her daughter, Miabel.

Eventually, the fractures in Tearmoon grew fatal as a civil war ensued. It was known as the Amethyst War, and in its wake, the Fertile Crescent grew arid and barren, and the safety of the region plummeted. But in the midst of this danger zone was a place that had retained a semblance of peace: the capital, Lunatear. The Whitemoon Palace, the city's center, was threatened by an overcast but retained its dignity. The castle had long lost its master, but the gardens and interior had been kept in perfect repair as if to express loyalty to the deceased Emperor Matthias, or perhaps, the Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon.

"This castle never changes..." remarked Sapphias Etoile Bluemoon as he gazed upon the symbol of authority that was the Whitemoon Palace with a faint grin. "It's hard to bite back a grin, knowing that this will someday be mine."

On the other side of Sapphias's smile was Dario Schubert, the younger brother of his deceased wife. He had taken the title of Marquess Schubert, and Sapphias gallantly led him inside the castle gates.

"It really has been quite a long time since I last visited the Whitemoon Palace. Letty was with me back then..."

"My sister?"

"Yes, we had come to announce our marriage," he said with a chuckle. "If only we could go back to those days. His Majesty and Her Highness were in perfect health when they blessed our union..."

The two climbed up an empty staircase to the open-air garden. It was beautiful and looked over the city. Some other guests had already made it to the table set up inside.

"It's been a while, hasn't it?" The girl who addressed him raised up her hand in greeting and spoke casually. Her hair was red and her face was filled with the same vigor it had had during their youth. However, a closer look revealed faint wrinkles at the corner of her eyes, and her blazing hair was dotted with the gray of burnt ashes.

So much was only natural, however. They had all already reached an age where they could have children, or even grandchildren. Both Sapphias and the girl before him served as the heads of major noble households, yet they had chosen to remain unmarried. He felt a sense of kinship with the red-haired girl and couldn't help but smile.

"It truly has. I suppose it's been since our graduation at Saint-

Noel Academy, or perhaps we've met on the battlefield?" Sapphias glanced at the girl sitting beside Ruby. "But I wasn't expecting to see you here. I believe this is the first time someone of House Yellowmoon has attended a Clair de Lune."

"Is it?" The girl who flashed him a sweet grin was none other than Citrina Etoile Yellowmoon. Her aura remained that of a young girl, but even she hadn't been able to withstand the flow of time; she bore the weight of age just like Ruby. "I apologize. I was simply too young and shy."

"Is Lady Greenmoon absent today? It's been quite a while since our last tea party, and if I remember correctly, she was the one who started the tradition," asked Ruby as she looked to Sapphias.

He shrugged. "Lady Esmeralda hasn't been the same since Her Highness's passing. I thought of bringing her younger brother with me, but he refused to share a cup of tea with such a militaristic lady." He looked behind him. "Instead, I have brought my brother-in-law with me. I hope that will not be a problem?"

Hearing this, Dario fixed his posture.

"Your brother-in-law? Ah, Marquess Schubert, was it? I believe it's a transgression to bring those who aren't Etoilers to this party... At least, I'm sure that's what Lady Greenmoon would say if she were present."

"Then it shouldn't be a problem, given she's not."

Suddenly, silence fell over the table. A garrulous woman with green hair flashed through Sapphias's mind, and he couldn't help but think that if she was here, things wouldn't be so awkward. She always loudly proclaimed what it meant to be an Etoiler, what it meant to support the empire, and what it meant to be a proper member of the central nobility, but ever since she had graduated from Saint-Noel's, those cries grew quieter, and after Princess Mia's passing, they grew silent.

I barely remember how noisy Lady Esmeralda once was...

Sapphias was once again brought back to his days at Saint-Noel Academy. Back in his youth, the seat of emperor—the apex of Tearmoon—felt so much farther away. He was a nobody who had yet to inherit his title, but at the same time, the future seemed to shine so much brighter...

"Moons... If no Greenmoons are here, there's not much use for this meeting. It's supposed to be a chance for us Etoilers to grow closer, after all."

Those words brought Sapphias back to reality. She was right, there were no longer any words that could be said, as he hadn't come here to rekindle old friendships.

"If that's how you see it, then holding a Clair de Lune already lost all meaning the moment we lost the ability to summon someone from the imperial family." Sapphias sat down, crossed his legs, and lifted the corners of his mouth. "The Clair de Lune was originally meant for us Etoilers to strengthen our relationship with Her Highness Mia. It's quite ironic I would receive an invitation to such an event from the exact person who made it so meaningless." Sapphias lowered his voice and went in for an attack.

"Meaningless? What do you mean?" asked Ruby as she blinked her eyes in surprise. She brought her cup of tea to her lips and relished a sip as Sapphias continued his diatribe.

"Don't play dumb. You're the ones who tried to end Emperor Matthias's imperial bloodline."

Once Princess Mia had been poisoned, her children and grandchildren died one after another. It was obvious it had been somebody's doing. Sapphias glared first at Ruby, then Citrina.

"If you want to pin that blame on me, you're barking up the wrong tree. Who would be there to take over the throne should Princess Mia's bloodline vanish? Wasn't it *you* who committed those crimes in an attempt to inherit the throne? I hear that the Bluemoon faction is adept at conspiracy."

"What did you say?" Sapphias jumped from his seat, but Dario held him back. As Sapphias's right-hand man and person in charge of organizing the central nobility, Dario made sure to speak calmly. "Relax, Lord Sapphias."

"Good choice, Marquess. I'd easily have been able to take on the both of you." Ruby let out an elegant laugh as she brought her hand to the sword affixed to her hip.

Dario responded with a taunting grin of his own. "If I may, our leader, Lord Sapphias, would be able to take you in a fight. The only reason I stopped him is because we came here to speak. But, if you would like to express any more insolence, I won't be holding myself back either," he said as he reached his hand for his own sword.

"Aha ha! You've got guts, Lord Schubert, more so than your own leader. However, *you* were the ones who were so insolent as to cast doubt on us Redmoons." She glanced at Sapphias. "Poisonings

don't suit the Redmoons anyway. If we were going to take someone out, we'd *fight* them head-on."

"I'm not so sure about that." Sapphias crossed his legs with a little too much force. "In any case, our side isn't too keen on fostering any friendships here. I was sure you had summoned me here to surrender."

"Surrender? Why?" Ruby glowered at him, not quite sure what to make of that statement.

"You know perfectly well... At least, that's what I'd like to say. Have you yet to do so here?"

"You mean the alliance you've formed with Holy Lady Rafina of Belluga?" Ruby spoke her words casually as if to tease him. "What? Are you surprised? Just as you know what our Ochre faction is up to, we research the Teal faction as well. It's basic military strategy." Ruby brought her teacup to her lips and elegantly took a sip before flashing Sapphias a relaxed grin.

"So you do know. Well, I suppose that makes this quicker. You don't want to make enemies of the Empress Prelate's army, do you? You'd be making the whole world your foes." Sapphias spoke his words haughtily, but Ruby dismissed him with a chuckle.

"You seem quite proud considering they're an army you don't lead, don't you think?" she looked over to Citrina.

"I believe it is a sign of the weak to borrow other's authority, so I'm not particularly surprised." She giggled as if to egg Sapphias on.

"I see. Now that you mention it, you're exactly right." Ruby cooly nodded her head before turning her gaze back to Sapphias. "In all honesty, we have no intention of surrendering. Rather, I'm looking forward to it. Your Teal Army just doesn't quite satisfy me."

"You're fools..." muttered Sapphias as he tightened the muscles on his face. "You truly plan on battling the Empress Prelate? The Ochre faction may lead over half of Tearmoon's forces, but don't you think you're being too haughty?"

"I never had any plans of only fighting the army of Tearmoon. An enemy of your enemy is a friend, after all," commented Ruby, completely unperturbed.

Sapphias scowled. "You're going to forge an alliance with the anti Empress Prelate faction of Sunkland? Or the Kingdom of Remno, perhaps?"

Ruby chuckled. "Exactly. Making friends with the survivors of the Equestrian Kingdom wouldn't be too bad either. If I made a few

of them generals, I'm sure they'd fight for me. Quite simply, the situation has grown quite chaotic. I wonder just who will come out on top if we tallied up all the forces at play... I'm quite excited to find out."

Sapphias gritted his teeth so hard it could be heard. "If you're looking to fight, there's nothing I can do. I was foolish to expect proper judgment from a Redmoon boar. I see I've wasted my time." Sapphias stood from his seat, eliciting some shock from Ruby.

"Hold on a second. Why don't you at least have one sip? These tea leaves are excellent." She gestured to his cup. "Let's share some tea together. Once you leave here, we're back to being enemies. For now, let's enjoy the aroma of these leaves and rekindle the feelings of friendship we once shared..."

"They're excellent, you say?" Sapphias sarcastically twitched his cheek and chuckled. "I can tell exactly where these leaves were grown by their scent. True, they're not bad, but they're quite not suitable for the lips of Duke Bluemoon." This time, he left for real. As he walked down the hall, he suddenly stopped and turned around, watching as Ruby enjoyed her tea in the garden. Suddenly, a sentence fell from his lips. "Just where did we go wrong?"

He had never been particularly close to the two girls, yet they had walked the same school halls and even danced as partners at parties. They had met at Clair de Lunes time and time again.

"I'll make sure this ends by the anniversary of Letty's death. Once I wipe out the Redmoons and Yellowmoons and take the throne...I'll go to her grave and let her know." Sapphias's voice was firm, as if he were trying to remove himself from any lingering attachments he felt to the two women.

"Lord Sapphias, please don't push yourself too—"

"Push myself? I have the central nobility and Empress Prelate on my side. My victory is all but certain. As the next emperor of the Tearmoon Empire, I'll quell these pointless flames of war in an instant."

Ruby watched Sapphias depart and shook her head. "Moons, I wonder when he became such a tea expert. Maybe this wasn't a tea tasting, but it's rude to not have at least one sip. What a disgrace to the central nobility." She lifted his cup into her hands. "Back then, he'd take a polite sip no matter what noble offered it to him. Have we simply grown old? Or maybe, it was losing someone so

important that changed him...” Ruby dumped the tea in his cup into a nearby flower pot.

“That’s not good for the plants. They’ll wither.”

“Really? You said it wasn’t poison...”

“Drinking it won’t kill you, so yes, it isn’t poison. It’ll simply steal your heart,” said Citrina with her usual sweet grin. “Still, I was quite proud of this new concoction. It’s a shame I wasn’t able to test it.”

“If he’d rather die on the battlefield, I’d be happy to grant him that wish. But moons, facing off against the Holy Aquarian Army will be tough for us.”

The purpose of this Clair de Lune had been, of course, to capture Sapphias. If they had been able to capture Marquess Dario Schubert, his right-hand man, they’d be golden. At the very least, they had wanted to kill him, but...

“Let’s send an official request for reinforcements from King Sion of Sunkland. It’s our only choice.”

“Do you really think he’ll send any?” asked Citrina with a tilt of her head.

Ruby spoke calmly. “I’m not too sure. If he sees this as a chance to surround the Empress Prelate’s forces, there’s a chance. If we don’t tread carefully, we’ll be forced to fight both the Teal faction and the Holy Aquarian Army head-on. Things don’t look good for us.”

Despite her words, Ruby was grinning. Yet while her lips formed an upward crescent, there was something reckless and uncertain about her expression.

“You seem excited.”

“It’s okay if we lose. I’d rather fight and go out in style than end my life never setting foot on the battlefield.”

Ruby Etoile Redmoon, the leader of the Ochre faction, spoke with a recklessness unbefitting of her title as “leader” and shook her head. She, too, had changed after losing someone she loved. He had perished in a fight to defend Mia’s eldest son, and while Ruby had heard he fought valiantly, that had meant nothing to her. If only she had scouted him for the Redmoons’ private army. If only she had the courage to suggest such to her father. She had plenty of regrets, but they no longer mattered to her. Unable to blame or hate anyone, Ruby had pointlessly lived through colorless days until one day, she had taken the name of Duchess Redmoon.

“Well, even if I’m not lucky enough to die in battle, I’ll still hand the seat of emperor to you, just like we promised, Miss Yellowmoon.”

Citrina giggled. “I look forward to that day, Ruby.” Her grin was that of wildflowers.

That was the final meeting between the Four Dukes recorded in Tearmoon’s history. They never once again shared a cup of tea, neither did the two who had lost their loved ones ever stop, nor did Esmeralda, who had lost someone precious herself, step in to stop the war. They continued the fight until they all perished, and once they were exhausted, the Holy Aquarian Army came to stamp out the rest. This world was a hell of countless lost lives and irreversible destruction, a possibility that had burned itself to ashes in the time it took for Bel to blink.

Then, the world changed.

That day, an unusual guest had come to visit the Bluemoons’ residence in Lunatear.

“It’s been quite a while, Lady Ruby. We haven’t seen each other since our graduation at Saint-Noel’s. About half a year, I suppose.” Her visit had been sudden, but Sapphias hadn’t found it rude. Instead, he jovially welcomed Ruby Etoile Redmoon into his home. “You came at the perfect time. I recently came into possession of some new tea leaves, but I can’t quite figure out the right temperature to roast them at. I was hoping I’d get to try them out on someone else before serving them to Letizia. Come and take a taste.”

Sapphias gave some orders to his butler and brought Ruby into their courtyard. Being able to share a cup of tea below the blue sky and surrounded by the green of trees was the ultimate luxury. Once Sapphias elegantly took his seat, he took one look at Ruby and realized something was wrong.

“Hm? What is it? You’re quite silent today.”

“Uh, um... Well...” She fidgeted in her seat. “Actually, I wanted your advice...”

“Huh? Advice? From me?” Sapphias couldn’t keep the shock off his face, but he quickly returned to his usual composure with a nod. “I see. In that case, I suppose we’ll need some tea if we want to

have a nice, long chat."

Sapphias surmised that this had to be serious business if Ruby had come all the way to visit him and ask his opinions. His primary emotion was that of nervousness as he picked up the teapot and elegantly poured a cup for Ruby and then himself.

"So? What is it? That you want to talk to me about, that is."

"Lord Sapphias of the Bluemoons, um...do you...wh-whisper sweet nothings to L-Letizia?"

Sapphias froze and stared at Ruby, his cup half-way to his lips. The question he had just heard seemed...not quite suitable for the occasion.

She seems to be having quite a difficult time getting her question out. I suppose I should assume this is such a major issue it's causing her tongue to slip...

Sapphias's sense of alarm heightened as Ruby further piled on those words. "No, um... I was interested to know what it was like, th-the first time you told Letizia how you felt about her..."

Sapphias sipped his tea and took a moment to relish its taste and aroma. "Hm... Yes, I suppose I haven't proven I'm someone you can trust, but..."

He assumed Ruby was struggling to get her words out not only due to the gravity of the situation, but because she lacked trust in him. Looking back, it was true he hadn't done anything to win her faith in him, but this was no way to have a conversation.

He looked at her seriously. "But I am still someone who dedicated himself to working for Her Highness's sake. Can you tell me honestly what you need to discuss? Considering that you've come all this way, I take it it's something quite important. Can you tell me what it is?" Sapphias maintained an expression of understanding to make it clear he knew what she was trying to say even if she couldn't get it out of her.

Ruby, on the other hand, looked completely baffled. "I-It's exactly what I've already said."

"...*Huh*?" Now it was Sapphias's turn.

Ruby, meanwhile, spoke with the expression of a soldier on the verge of breaking through the enemy force's vanguard and making it into their center. "Th-There's a man wh-who I have...have taken a fancy to. I-I wanted to ask your advice on how to make those feelings clear to him..."

Ruby's do-or-die spirit had Sapphias hanging his mouth open in

shock, but he quickly covered it up by taking a sip of tea, then another. “Hm, I see. May I have the details?”

Sapphias neither laughed nor teased her, instead calmly relaying only what was necessary. Despite what you may assume, Sapphias was a gentleman, and slightly relieved by this, Ruby began to speak. She told him how her heart had been stolen and explained everything from the very beginning until this very moment with perhaps a little *too* much passion.

While her speech was incredibly—*incredibly*—long-winded, Sapphias remained silent throughout. He viewed love and its affairs as something incredibly important, so of course, he could never laugh at the love affairs of others. Shouldn’t he be proud that Ruby chose *him* of all people for this? It meant that the love he shared with Letizia was a textbook example, and it had him bursting with glee!

It was only when Ruby had finally finished speaking that Sapphias opened his mouth. “I’m quite moved. So that’s how it is...” Deep emotion filled him. “I was convinced you had little interest in matters of love, but I see I was mistaken.”

“I can’t help but feel like you’re making fun of me,” said Ruby with puffed cheeks.

Sapphias rushed to defend himself. “Not at all! Don’t twist my words! I’m quite moved, honestly.”

“In that case, can you answer my questions? How did you confess your feelings to your fiancée, Duke Blu—no, Sapphias?”

Once again faced with the same question, Sapphias furrowed his brow. “Well, Letizia and I have been betrothed since we were young, so I never had to make any defining declaration of my love...”

His answer clearly shocked Ruby. “Oh, I see. That makes sense.” She nodded, looking both surprised and disappointed. Then, she took a sip of her tea. “These are from Perujin, no? They really do smell divine,” she said with a giggle.

“Don’t they? I really do have respect for their taste. Had I never worked under Princess Mia on the student council, I would have never thought such a thing,” he muttered, reminiscing on his days spent at the academy. “Well... If I were to give my advice, I’d have to say to not lose your chance to confess, as hackneyed as it may be.” He raised his teacup in the air as if giving a toast. “And even should you fail, Princess Mia is sure to do something about it, so

don't worry and share your feelings honestly."

"What do you mean?" Ruby couldn't help but grin.

Sapphias shrugged. "Exactly what I said! Her Highness granted you this precious opportunity, no?" Sapphias watched Ruby nod with a grin. "In that case, if things don't work out, you can just have Her Highness take responsibility. No matter if things go in your favor or not, I'm certain nothing bad will come of it."

"I see you really trust Miss Mia."

Sapphias nodded, his expression serious. "Of course I do. She saved me, not to mention many others. The Tearmoon Empire needs her. I'm still searching for those who will approve of her becoming empress within the Bluemoon faction, but I at least will dedicate all the loyalty I have to her." With that, he filled Ruby in on the current circumstances of his faction.

"I see it's best you act as a candidate for emperor until things get a bit more under control."

"Indeed. Thanks to Her Highness's efforts during her Birthday Festival, her preparations to defend against famine, and her relationship with our neighboring nations, there are many houses who support her. Still, my father's ambitions remain, and I'm not quite sure what to make of it all. I've got some work cut out for me," he said with a sigh. "Well, since he's capable of calculating risk versus reward, I doubt he will force our family into danger."

"It can sometimes be hard to predict how eminent noble families will act, so I understand how it could be the same for Duke Bluemoon, who's in charge of keeping all those families in line. I hope the Redmoons' public support of Mia will shift things in our favor..."

"Hm... If the Yellowmoons support the princess, that only leaves us and the Greenmoons. Plainly, there's no benefit to be had by making enemies out of each other, but I hope we don't cause any unnecessary trouble by allying with the Greenmoons to chip away at Her Highness's forces..." He scowled for a moment, but quickly returned to his jovial grin. "I never thought she'd so easily get Duke Redmoon on her side. She's really something."

"I was surprised, myself. I never thought Princess Mia's riding skills would be so excellent, not to mention that girl from the Equestria Kingdom... She was amazing. With people like that under her, it's hard to overestimate her."

"Was she really so skilled? How interesting."

“Oh? I thought you had no interest in boorish military affairs?” Ruby seemed quite shocked.

Sapphias sighed. “We’re no longer in the days I spent in school where I could say such things. Even our Bluemoon domain is not so well run that there are no scoundrels. We need a sword who can quell those hoodlums and maintain the peace.”

Ruby giggled. “In that case, I’d be happy to share any advice you might need.”

“You have my deepest apologies. I’ll be counting on you.” Sapphias’s words were laudable, and Ruby responded with a vigorous nod.

“We both are here to support Princess Mia and our country. There’s no need to apologize. Rather, I think you need to stay on guard and focus on protecting yourself. Those Serpents aren’t something a private army can handle…”

Sapphias chuckled. “I think House Bluemoon is one of the few houses you don’t have to worry about them slipping into.” He tried to laugh her concerns away, but his face quickly grew serious. He remembered that their foes weren’t a group that could be so underestimated. “No, you’re right. I shall remain vigilant. Her Highness is wary of them, after all. I thank you for the warning.”

“That’s the spirit. Especially if you have someone to care for as you do.”

“Indeed. Well, if we are on Her Highness’s side, it’s impossible to know who might make a pass on our lives. It’s best we keep loyal vassals near us. How did you find the tea, by the way?”

“It’s a bit too lukewarm for my liking. I think the aroma would be stronger if it was served hotter.”

Thus the two shared a pot of tea.

The Clair de Lune was a tea party held between the Great Sage of the Empire and the Four Dukes. At times, it was a site of change that could decide the empire’s future. At others, it was just an opportunity for them to share a good cup of tea. Even after Mia had become empress, the Clair de Lune lived on.

Mia's Diary of Culinary Research

Since I'll be having a cooking party with Letizia, I want to use the time I have until then to do some culinary research! I hear Letizia isn't too skilled in the kitchen, so it's the job of a veteran like me to take the lead. I usually just eat my food, but from now on, I'll be asking about every step of the recipe to increase my knowledge. Let's do this thing!

The Third Day of the Eighth Month

Today, I had ambermoon tomato stew, which tasted the same as always. The chef must really be skilled to always produce the same results! I had no complaints about the taste nor the portion size.

The recipe involves intensely boiling the vegetables. You have to make sure to scrape off the scum and add seasoning halfway into the process. Apparently, the chef adjusts the seasoning to match that day's temperature and the ripeness and quantity of the vegetables inside. While it's in the wheelhouse of a veteran chef, I'm a bit worried as to whether I can cook it myself, though I do believe I have enough experience to be considered a veteran. In any case, I was moved to see the sharpness of the chef's skills and the tenacity it takes to boil vegetables.

Taste: ☆x5

Difficulty: ☆x5

The Fourth Day of the Eighth Month

Today's dish was marinated rouge salmon. To make it, you soak the smoked salmon in a marinade and add thinly sliced moonjewel onions and chopped herbs on top. The exquisite aroma of the acid and onions combines with the smokiness of the salmon to create an amazing flavor. The mushrooms on the side admirably added to this dish.

I suppose the hardest part of the recipe is slicing the onions. Besides that, you just have to marinate the rouge salmon, so even I

should be able to do it. I'm quite confident in my mushroom-choosing skills, so I think I should be able to garnish this dish well.

Taste: ☆x4

Difficulty: ☆x3 (Even I could make this)

The Fifth Day of the Eighth Month

Today I had an exquisite steak. It was cooked with aromatic mushrooms and a thick sauce sandwiched between the meat, making it look like cake at a glance! The flavor of the sauce soaked into the tender meat while the mushrooms added a bite to the dish. It was near perfection, with the meat thoroughly heated without being overcooked.

According to the chef, cooking the meat to the right temperature is the key to this dish, and it's important to always be aware of how hot the fire is. Since the meat has to be worked quickly, making it sounds quite difficult.

Wait, isn't Liora skilled at cooking meats? With her on my team, I think I might be able to make this.

Taste: ☆x5

Difficulty: ☆x6 (Perhaps I can challenge this high bar!)

The Sixth Day of the Eighth Month

Today, I won't be writing about cooking, but baking! Specifically, I'll be talking about the chef's hand-made vegetable cake. Its deliciousness used to be the only thing I looked for, so I never realized it had so many vegetables. Not to mention, each vegetable has its own way you need to cut it, which gave me a headache. One mistake in how many vegetables you add, and the cake won't be sweet enough, so you have to be careful.

Well... Anne's cooked castella before, so if we worked together we should be able to make one, right? I'm quite confident in my skills, after all! Let's make one soon.

Taste: ☆x5

Difficulty: ☆x5

Hm, I just can't decide what to make at the party. Well, anything with mushrooms is cooking, so I suppose the most important thing is deciding which mushrooms to use. In any case, it's rare we all get to cook together! I hope we'll all be able to share a tasty meal at the end of it.

Afterword

It's been a while. I'm Nozomu Mochitsuki, and I hope you've all been well.

This may sound a bit sudden, but I've started cooking recently, and it taught me something. Until now, I always thought the burnt-to-a-crisp foods cooked by amateurs was something that only happened in the realm of fiction and that it had to be an exaggeration. But when I tried cooking for myself, I realized that for beginners, it's hard to know if something's really cooked through all the way, which really can lead to burning things. I came to this realization while munching on some rock-hard ginger pork.

For the adventurers and travelers in fantasy worlds without refrigeration technology, it's especially important to make sure you don't give yourself a stomachache outside town. I think it would make perfect sense if overcooking their food was survival basics for them.

Anyways, I now realize that it's quite possible to burn your food to a crisp, even if that doesn't mean I can condone Mia's practice of sneaking questionable mushrooms into her food.

Mia: "My! You just don't understand! Cooking is a challenge! If you forget your ambition to reach new frontiers, your cooking will grow stagnant!"

Bel: "Oh, I see Grandm— Miss Mia! You have a point! It's important to always remain adventurous!"

Letizia: "What a lovely idea. I see I have a lot to learn from you two!"

Sapphias and Keithwood: "..."

Now for some words of thanks.

First, to Gilse for his wonderful illustrations. I've been waiting to see a colored picture of Sapphias and Ruby for a while, and you didn't disappoint!

To my editor, F, who not only dealt with things relating to the

anime adaptation, but saved me in all sorts of ways.

To my friends and family, thank you for your continued support.

Finally, to all my readers. It feels like we made it to volume 14 in the blink of an eye! Thank you so much for sticking with me for so long, and I'd be grateful if you stuck with Mia on her journey for a little while longer.

Well then, I hope we meet again in the next volume!

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Tearmoon Empire: Volume 14
by Nozomu Mochitsuki

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Original Japanese edition published in 2023 by TO Books
This English edition is published by arrangement with TO Books, Tokyo
English translation © 2025 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: January 2025